

**CAREY THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE**

**PRACTICES TO FACILITATE FAITH AMIDST SUFFERING**

BY

ELIZABETH ANN THAKKAR

A Doctor of Ministry Project submitted

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry.

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**CAREY THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE**

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend for acceptance a

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In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **DOCTOR OF  
MINISTRY.**

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Dr. Timothy Dickau (Supervisor)

---

Dr. Jonathan R. Wilson (Second Reader)

Date: June 11, 2017

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7211 11<sup>th</sup> St. SW, Calgary, AB T2V 1N2

Date: June 11, 2017

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To those who participated in this research, who entrusted me with your stories of suffering, be assured your gifts to me far exceed the limitations of this work. Your stories have moved me, humbled me, and daily reminded me our stories are indeed held within a much bigger, much more beautiful *Story*.

To my daughters, Paige and Mya Thakkar - you have always been, and always will be, my greatest source of motivation and pride.

Finally, to the One who began this story, who right from its conception has relentlessly provided for its salvation, redemption, and recreation. To You I give all my thanks and praise.

## ABSTRACT

Many believers feel unprepared to meet the challenges suffering poses to their faith. The intent of this eight-week project was to introduce practices of faith to suffering believers. The purposes for doing so were to provide believers with resources through which they might encounter God in the midst of their affliction and be both comforted and encouraged.

Two traditional Christian practices, storytelling and the Ignatian *Examen*, were selected for these purposes. The practice of storytelling welcomed participating believers to share their narratives of suffering. The intention of this practice was to affirm the inherent value of the believer's narrative because of the inherent value of the believer, as a person uniquely created by God and through whom God uniquely reveals God's person to us. These narratives likewise bear unique witness to the presence and power of God's redemptive work both to the church and to the world.

The practice of the *Examen* invited these same believers to bring their stories before God not only to contextualize their narrative within God's meta-narrative, but that *they* might see God's presence and God's agency at work in their lives, even amidst their suffering.

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

When I was approximately 16 weeks pregnant with our first child doctors informed us, our baby did not appear to be developing normally. A conclusive diagnosis of the problem, however, would not be possible to provide until the baby was born. Though I have grown up in the church, worked on the mission field both at home and abroad, and even pursued a graduate degree in spiritual theology, my faith was not prepared for the shock of that day, nor for the cascading series of traumas which lay ahead.<sup>1</sup>

Upon her arrival, our baby girl required immediate surgery. This initial surgery was followed by a second surgery; after which she was diagnosed with an acute liver disease. More surgeries followed and on their heels, came a liver transplant, a cancer diagnosis, and several subsequent brushes with death. Throughout this ordeal neither I nor our church knew what to do or say. So, the church primarily stayed away and I struggled to sustain my faith. Meanwhile my husband, whose upbringing in faith closely mirrored my own, began to wrestle with issues which would eventually lead to the breakup of our family. The church likewise recoiled from helping me navigate my husband's struggles when I sought assistance. The only assistance offered to us

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<sup>1</sup> I want to be careful *not* to suggest there are some 'magic' resources the church might offer believers that will somehow dismiss or even diminish what is experienced because of suffering. But what I am advocating for is an *intentional* forming and informing of believers in the ways of suffering, so they do not meet suffering unprepared for its challenges.

came down to a promise to pray for my husband, and encouragement to seek professional counseling.

As the years ensued the traumas did not cease. Along with the precarious nature of our first child's health, my husband's struggles continued to escalate. His behaviour added serious strain to an already taut climate in our home. The combination of these pressures likely contributed to our second child's chronic battle with anxiety and suicide. All of which was only further complicated when I was also diagnosed with breast cancer.

The culmination of stress factors taking place within our family took its toll on our children, and eventually led their school principal to inform me if I was not prepared to remove the children from our home, Social Services would be called.

Again, I went to the church for help, but received no practical assistance. In fact, from this point forward the church became silent and absent from any form of engagement with us. When I eventually divorced my husband the response from the church was, "we are so sorry it has come to this". Such impotence and disengagement was grievous.

A year later, by happenstance, I read about *Divorce Care* and *Grief Share* in our church bulletin and participated in both courses.<sup>2</sup> Though I

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<sup>2</sup> Both of these courses were developed to assist churches in trying to meet the growing need for ministering primarily to evangelical parishioners experiencing loss of family through death (*Grief Share*) and divorce (*Divorce Care*). The format for both courses are the same. All teaching segments are delivered via DVD. Participants are provided with workbooks coinciding with the DVD teaching segments and a facilitator guides the discussion ensuing from the teaching.

was grateful for these courses and their sincere attempt to minister to those in pain, the nature and scope to which they spoke was limited to these two specific sources of affliction. But it was all the church had to offer, apart from suggesting counseling.

Resources to deal with affliction, both prior to its arrival and in its midst, is sorely lacking not only in our church, but within the Protestant Evangelical (PE) community. My own need for support and assistance in faith to navigate this extremely difficult journey eventually led me to turn to a para-church organization, which had arisen in response to this same need expressed by other believers.<sup>3</sup>

This is the background and the impetus for my interest in this project, and why I long to see the church intentionally preparing believers to deal with suffering in faith. I do not believe the question is whether or not suffering will come, but when, and what are we doing to prepare believers so they might meet suffering faithfully? We would never encourage a non-swimmer to head out to sea for a swim just because they had read a book about swimming. Yet I fear this is analogous to what the church is doing with believers by not preparing them for suffering. This project was designed with such a trajectory in mind, with the hope of facilitating the church's ability to resource believers to contend in faith with the troubles this life is sure to bring.

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<sup>3</sup> The para-church ministry which proved most helpful to me, both in terms of information about dealing with suffering *and* practices to assist me in embodying a faithful response to suffering is *Journey Canada*, formerly called *Living Waters Canada* (see <http://www.journeycanada.org>).

## CHAPTER ONE:

### The Project

Many believers feel unprepared to meet the challenges suffering poses to their faith. This lack of adequate preparation to deal with suffering, combined with the reception many have received at the hands of the church in the midst their suffering, have left many believers feeling cut off from God and bereft of any consolation or comfort from their faith.<sup>4</sup>

Each of our lives is a narrative, which bears witness to God's unique work in and through us. Therefore, everyone's story holds inherent value as a testimony of God's presence and power, particularly amidst suffering. Each of our stories should then be a resource of encouragement for the body, and the sharing of our stories a means of acknowledging the presence of suffering, yet recognizing God's faithfulness to us even in its midst.

The ancient practice of the Examen is a way in which believers have sought to give God the opportunity to reveal where God has been and continues to be present and at work in their lives, contextualizing their narratives within God's grand meta-narrative.

Through this project, it was my intention to answer the question: can inviting suffering believers into the practices of storytelling and the Examen over a period of eight weeks provide them with ways to

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<sup>4</sup> Data collected in an unpublished research project, E. Ann Thakkar, *A Resource for Hope Amidst Suffering*, (Vancouver, BC: Carey Theological College, Dec. 2015).

encounter God amidst their suffering and to receive God's comfort and consolation in the process?

For several years, I have been functioning as a mentor for many believers experiencing suffering. Though I have no official institutional affiliations, I am in regular contact with professional counselors, pastors, and Spiritual Directors in order to draw on their counsel, expertise, and training. I have been a member of Bethany Chapel in Calgary, Alberta for the past 18 years. I have been a part of the Sunday morning prayer ministry team, a speaker for numerous groups both inside and outside of our church, and a facilitator for Grief Share and Divorce Care within our church. I have led Bible studies and taught small group courses for over 15 years.

Participants for this project came from the church community and/or through personal contacts.

The focus of this project was to provide space for participants to share their stories of suffering. The participants were then invited to bring these stories before God in prayer, allowing God the opportunity to reveal God's presence and agency to the believers within their stories.

I met once with each of the three participants during the first and last weeks of the course. For the six intervening weeks, the participants and I met altogether one night per week.

Though I am not formally affiliated with an institution I stand and practice within the tradition of those who seek to comfort others with the

comfort we ourselves have received from God, referred to by Paul in 2 Cor. 1:3-7. In this regard, I also stand and practice in the broad historical tradition of spiritual friend and counselor. This tradition is perhaps best exemplified by the Desert Fathers and Mothers in various monastic traditions, those who freely offered what they had been given by God to anyone who came seeking. Like these traditions, I too believe individuals need accompaniment and encouragement to recognize and respond to God's presence and work in their lives, most especially in the midst of affliction.

I also draw heavily upon the Ignatian prayer practice of the *Examen*. This practice was designed to provide believers with the opportunity to recognize God's presence and agency in their lives that they might be lead into a deeper love for God and service towards others.<sup>5</sup> The *Examen* provides believers with spaciousness and opportunity to consider not only God's presence, but also their responsiveness to God. This practice is ultimately a practice of discernment through which believers can be given the gift of assurance of God's willingness to reveal God's active agency and presence in their lives and the affirmation their lives are a part of the very life and purposes of God.<sup>6</sup> So the specific practice of the *Examen* is a process of inviting participants to allow God the opportunity to reveal to them where God is in the midst of their

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<sup>5</sup> See Fr. George Aschenbrenner, S. J.'s forward to *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for our Lives Today* by Timothy M. Gallagher, (New York, NY: The Crossroads Publishing, 2006), 9-13.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/> Retrieved Feb. 12, 2016.

stories, even in the midst of their suffering.<sup>7</sup> It is a practice of prayer, reflection, and discernment. The *Examen* is rooted in the Ignatian conviction that God is active, personal, and – above all- present to us.<sup>8</sup>

There has been a renewed interest in Ignatian traditions of prayer practices in recent years within some Evangelical circles. Though originating within the Catholic context, these traditions and practices have been easily adapted to the Protestant Evangelical context because they are firmly rooted in the life of Jesus and the Gospels.

This project was a combination of the Christian practice of storytelling, alongside an adaption of the practice of the Ignatian *Examen* for the purposes of building up the body of Christ.

It was my hope as believers were invited into the practice of storytelling and given opportunity to bring these narratives before God in the practice of the *Examen*, a new narrative would emerge as God uncovered where God has been present and at work throughout their stories. In the end my prayer was that these believers would experience and partake in the redemptive lives of one another, and this in turn would deepen their desire and engagement to participate in God's redemptive purposes for the whole world.

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<sup>7</sup> The work of Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* and Ronald Rolheiser in *The Shattered Lantern* have proven to be helpful guides here, as both describe our modern experience of God lacking any transformative effect within an imminent framework (Taylor) or imagined only for our personal pragmatic benefit (Rolheiser).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/what-is-ignatian-spirituality/where-can-i-find-god/>  
Retrieved Feb. 12, 2016.

I believe the value of this project lies primarily in its ability to encourage the church in the use of formative practices, most especially as a means of resourcing believers to meet the challenges of suffering faithfully. I think there was also a secondary value to this project. As the church begins to learn to tell her story and place her suffering before God, allowing God to reveal God's self in the midst of her suffering, the same power that transformed the suffering of Jesus will become evident in the life and witness of the church as well.

As a believer, I have faced a variety of both acute and chronic forms of suffering for the past 23 years. During these times, I have encountered both care and apathy from the church. These experiences have taught me a great deal about what preparation the average Evangelical believer is and is not receiving, with which to meet the challenges of suffering in faith. These experiences led to the commencement of a Doctorate of Ministry with the intent purpose of being a part of helping address these gaps of preparation and resources for believers that they might walk in faith when confronted by suffering. Within the context of the doctoral program I have intentionally chosen courses and written research papers with this end in mind. However, I continue to recognize my lack of sufficient background in the historical practices of formation in the church.

This project ran for approximately eight weeks and involved three participants. I commenced the project by meeting individually with each

of the participants, asking them to tell me the story of their suffering. This initial meeting was followed by regular weekly meetings once per week for a period of six weeks, in which I led all three participants in a group practice of the *Examen*. At the conclusion of these six weeks I then met with the participants individually one more time to see if/if not the experience of these two practices, telling their story and the *Examen*, affected the way they now narrated their stories.

There are programs available to the church for meeting specific kinds of suffering, such as Divorce Care, Grief Share, as well as a variety of other therapeutic models designed to run peripheral to the central ways and means churches seek to form believers. What I was hoping to do was both encourage and demonstrate something more organic than these types of peripheral programs or models. My intention was to demonstrate practices that could become a part of the central or normative ways and means churches seek to form people in Christ. Practices which could assist believers in faithfully meeting the challenges of suffering while deepening their maturity and engagement with God's missional purposes in the world.

The primary theological issue in this project pertains to the Incarnation as participants encounter and experience God's presence and agency through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, directly in their lives and through the lives of one another. The secondary theological issues

consisted of the nature of suffering and the role of practices in our spiritual formation.

The research methodology followed the “Narrative Inquiry” method advocated by Clandinin and Connelly in their book, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*.<sup>9</sup> The research tools were comprised of two semi-structured interviews with participants at the onset and conclusion of the project; tape recordings and transcriptions of these interviews; researcher’s field notes and journal; and relevant data collected from previous research in which the three present participants were involved.

The baseline data was established through participants’ initial telling of their stories in the first semi-structured interview. This provided a preliminary window into how the participants understood the meaning and significance of their suffering and the role it has played in their life of faith. It also provided an initial sense of where participants have seen or not seen God’s presence and God’s involvement with them in their suffering. The final opportunity for participants to share their story was intended to determine whether or not the practices of storytelling and the *Examen* elicited a re-narrating of their stories.

Field notes were gathered both during participant interviews, as well as during the weekly practice of the *Examen*. The researcher’s

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<sup>9</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

journal was used to capture the experience of the researcher throughout the project.

Data was collected through pre-and post semi-structured interviews; tape recordings and transcripts of these interviews; researcher's field notes; researcher's journal; and relevant data from previous research involving these participants. <sup>10</sup>

The target group for this project was believers in the midst of affliction. Participants were all be females ranging in ages from 42 to 53 years old. These particular women were asked to participate in the project because they had been involved in previous research with me and expressed a desire to do so again. <sup>11</sup>

The analytical framework described by Sensing, as themes, slippages, and silences was used. <sup>12</sup> The data was also coded in order to collect and identify any emerging patterns. <sup>13</sup> In addition, narrative analytic considerations were used to construct a chronicled/summarized account of the data gathered, paying particular attention to the three dimensions of narrative inquiry spaces: temporality, place, and personal/social. <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Data collected in an unpublished research project, E. Ann Thakkar, *A Resource for Hope Amidst Suffering*, (Vancouver, BC: Carey Theological College, Dec. 2015).

<sup>11</sup> I think it is worthwhile noting these participants all had a significant biblical background from which to draw throughout the project.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*, (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2011), 197-202.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-207.

<sup>14</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 50.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Literature Review

Discussions surrounding practices of faith and suffering, the two primary concerns of this research, run deep and in many directions. As the focus of this project is the intersection of these two issues, specifically how practices of faith might contribute to the ability of believers to faithfully meet the challenges posed by suffering, the discussions are much fewer. Little has been written on the intersection of suffering and practices of faith specifically. The majority of resources available tend to deal with one issue or the other, not the dynamic relationship between the two. But it is in light of my reading in both the areas of suffering and practices of faith, which led me to believe there was the possibility of rich resources to be had in the wedding of the two. I believe these wedding could significantly aid the church in both preparing believers to meet suffering faithfully, as well as sustaining their faith in the midst of affliction.

This literature review is intended to highlight the works which have *most* richly informed my thinking and shaped the nature of this project's design. My hope is to provide a starting point from which to continue this conversation and thereby supply the church with both encouragement and the means for equipping the saints to be prepared for and sustained amidst suffering.

In addition to the works on suffering and practices, I would be amiss if I did not also address another rich resource behind my thinking for this project. Within the church one of our best guides to understanding the role practices play in our life of faith can be found within the monastic tradition. Partly due to the tradition's *raison d'être* and partly due to its longevity, the monastic tradition provides foundational resources for any thinking about the issue of formation. My study within this tradition has played a significant role in my thinking. Consequently, before turning to the contemporary resources which informed this project, I want to address some of the foundational ideas I have gleaned particularly from the cenobitic monastic tradition.<sup>15</sup> It is these ideas which laid the ground work for the design of this project and my hope that practices of faith might enable us to meet the challenges of suffering.

### **I. Introduction to Practices:**

To begin I think it is necessary to define what I mean by the term 'practices'. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra define practices in this way, "Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world in Christ Jesus".<sup>16</sup> Christian practices are a means by which we

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<sup>15</sup> See footnote 23 on page 23 for a further explanation of the two primary monastic traditions.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, 18, n.3.

develop a way of being in the world, a means of acquiring a specific orientation, posture, or understanding of life, such that our body responds to situations without necessarily engaging cognitive processes.<sup>17</sup>

Practices of faith are intended to facilitate the formation of believers as a particular people in much the same way physically learning how to do the front crawl facilitates our ability to swim. The process of being formed into a follower Christ and a part of Christ's body likewise requires the physical embodiment of particular beliefs, particular responses, instincts, behaviours, and habits, all of which contribute to the development of something akin to "muscle memory".<sup>18</sup> The dynamics between faith formation and how our faith functions are therefore closely related. To continue with the swimming analogy - how well a swimmer swims or functions in the water will be dependent on how well a swimmer has been trained, or formed (natural athletic ability aside). Sitting on a pool deck reading a manual about how to swim does not qualify someone as a swimmer. The same is true of believers: functionality is correlated to formation, and expecting competent function without equally competent formation is unrealistic, if not absurd.

In turn, just as the "malformation" of a swimmer could lead to a catastrophic event, so our "malformation" in faith can dramatically

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<sup>17</sup> An example of what I mean here can be seen by observing the response of a congregation when it is called to prayer: the majority of congregants bow their head.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to underscore both the communal nature of this process and the reality it requires a lifetime.

impact the way in which we function, particularly in times of duress.<sup>19</sup>

This is why I believe it is significant for the church to give serious intentional consideration to the ways in which we are forming people in general, but to practices of faith which might better prepare/equip believers to meet the challenges of suffering, in particular. I believe to neglect and/or be passive about such intentional formation is still a means of malformation.<sup>20</sup>

God had instituted specific practices for the people of Israel that they might become a *certain* kind of people with a *certain* way of life directed towards a *certain* end.<sup>21</sup> So, partaking in practices of faith, just as it was for the nation of Israel, is to embody a *certain* ontological and teleological reality. As followers of Christ we must do no less, for we are *new* creations, a *new* people with a *new* identity, purpose, and way of life. Practices of faith, therefore, must intentionally reinforce these truths and help us to remember our *new* reality.

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<sup>19</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Discipleship in the Present Tense* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Calvin College Press, 2013), 35-36.

<sup>20</sup> See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2009), 89-129 for his discussion on the impact of our formation by “secular liturgies”, which is occurring with (or far more likely) without our awareness.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

## **II. Resources for Understanding Practices found in the Monastic**

### **Tradition:** <sup>22</sup>

Though the monastic tradition finds its roots in church history as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the tradition continues into the present day in a variety of forms, both Protestant and Catholic, as well as in the more recent incarnation referred to as “new monasticism”. <sup>23</sup> For the sake of clarity then, it is important to note this survey situates itself in what I will refer to as the Catholic Monastic Tradition or ‘CMT’, for short. <sup>24</sup>

Within the CMT practices are understood to contribute to the broader, all-encompassing goal of forming a new life in Christ. This process of formation is not merely a matter of acquiring information, education, instruction, or understanding, though it incorporates all of these pedagogical elements, <sup>25</sup> which is where formation differs most

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<sup>22</sup> Much of my reading and writing for this section commenced in a course offered by Carey Theological College in June 2014, entitled “Intentional Christian Community” with Dr. Charles Ringma.

<sup>23</sup> An introduction to this new movement of reform can be found in Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What it has to say to Today’s Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Within this tradition there are two schools of monasticism, the hermetic and the cenobitic. It is the cenobitic tradition on which this survey solely depends. See James Mc Murray, “Monastic Stability,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* Vol. 1.2 (1966): 209-224; Hedwig Vrensen, “Formation,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* Vol. 5.4 (1970): 354-362; Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata, “The Origins of Monasticism,” *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisbury, PA: Trinity Press International), 1999; *The Rule of Our Most Holy Father St. Benedict, Patriarch of Monk - from the Old English Edition of 1638*, edited in Latin and English, (London: Washbourne, 1875), [www.saintsbooks.net](http://www.saintsbooks.net) (accessed April, 2016); *The Rule of St. Basil in Latin and English – A Revised Critical Edition*, translated by Anna M. Silvas, (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press), 2013, [www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org) (accessed April, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> [www.cmglobal.org/vincentiana](http://www.cmglobal.org/vincentiana), “Ongoing Formation of Religious”, 92.

from mentoring or the more popularized understanding of discipleship.<sup>26</sup> Formation within the monastic model is much wider in its scope and deeper in its purposes than these ideas because the intent is the transformation of a person's entire mode of existence, nothing short of 'metanoia'.<sup>27</sup> The process of formation is intended to parallel the death and resurrection of Christ within each person. It is understood to be a costly process, but a journey meant to bring people to a place where they are able to be responsible with the gift of freedom God has given us. It is a journey intended to bring people to a place where their choices are no longer being made out of slavery to compulsions and addictions, but out of the remarkable liberty we have in Christ.<sup>28</sup> Formation, within the monastic tradition is, and continues to be, about getting to the core of what motivates us and therefore where we are truly deriving our identity.<sup>29</sup> There are two fundamental characteristics that shape monastic life and therefore the process of formation. One pertains to the nature of the vows a monastic must make to become a member of any Catholic order. The second characteristic is the taking of the vow itself.

It is impossible to read monastic material without being struck by the passionate quest for union with God which characterizes it. Consequently, it is this longing for intimacy with God that supersedes all

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<sup>26</sup> Dallas Willard's essay, "Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done" from [www.dwillard.org](http://www.dwillard.org) provides some excellent insights into the ways in which the popularized idea of discipleship differs from the idea of formation.

<sup>27</sup> Treadwell Walden, *The Great Meaning of the Word Metanoia: Lost in the Old Version, Unrecovered in the New*. (Thomas Whittaker, 1896), 1, 3.

<sup>28</sup> [www.cbglobal.org/vincentiana](http://www.cbglobal.org/vincentiana), "Ongoing Formation of Religious" p. 3

<sup>29</sup> Charles R. Ringma, *Seeking the Silences*, (London: SPCK, 2003), xix.

other intentions in the role of formation, regardless of the particular charism of the order.<sup>30</sup> In the monastic tradition, it is understood that the health of any community is dependent on the radical nature of the formation of those comprising the community. So, formation is understood to be a *way of life* intended to facilitate a person's union with God, the very foundation of all monastic communities. This is why the Evangelical Counsels are pivotal to monastic vows.<sup>31</sup> The Counsels express the evangelical radicalism one must be prepared to commit to for life in order to become a member of a monastic community. In taking the vows the monastic expresses her/his commitment to relinquish anything that would prevent or inhibit their full abandonment to union with God and serving God for the duration of his/her life. Taking these vows is understood as the laying down, or putting to death, of one identity in order to be resurrected into another.<sup>32</sup>

The vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience seek to uproot the anthropomorphic understanding of how we construct our identity and live our lives. The Counsels are meant to reorient the basis of a person's identity in Christ and their ethic in the Sermon on the Mount and the beatitudes.<sup>33</sup> It is in this laying down of one's old life in order to enter into union with God that is the basis of our union with one another - our "*comm* union" (our union together) - which most profoundly proclaims

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<sup>30</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife), "Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes", p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> [www.cmglobal.org/vincentiana](http://www.cmglobal.org/vincentiana), "Ongoing Formation of Religious", p. 100.

the reality of the gospel, "...By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another" (John 13:35).<sup>34</sup> In living out these Evangelical Counsels the monastic proclaims the gospel, embodies a vision of the life to come, and reflects the all-sufficiency of Jesus.<sup>35</sup> But what is the significance of making such a public, lifetime vow and how does this practice impact the process of formation?

There is a difference between cohabitation and marriage. Living together involves only a partial commitment and does not alter either person's identity. Living together requires no external accountability or public declaration of intent before witnesses. Living with someone does not presume the same degree of faithfulness between people. This arrangement is understood to be about 'testing the waters'. If someone decides they are not happy or a better arrangement comes along, the relationship can be abandoned. Few people enter marriage so lightly.<sup>36</sup>

In order to become part of a monastic community a person makes vows as serious as those in the sacrament of marriage. Rings are given, clothing is exchanged, and a new name is adopted because a new life has begun. This level of commitment brings with it a radical stability and mutuality to the community.<sup>37</sup> This is not a commitment entered into lightly, privately, individually, or without cost. But as Vanier points out,

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<sup>34</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife), "Fraternal Life in Community", p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccrclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccrclife), "Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes", p. 54-55.

<sup>36</sup> Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 29.

<sup>37</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife), "Fraternal Life in Community", p. 22.

“In our time, when there is so much infidelity...so many people who have not been faithful to their promises to love each other, more and more communities need to be born as signs of fidelity (that reflect) the fidelity of God”.<sup>38</sup>

Though the early stages of formation provide the candidate and the community time to discern whether or not God is calling them together, the process is not begun without significant, sufficient, and serious openness to the possibility on the part of both parties. These initial periods of formation are similar to old-fashioned courtship, one in which marriage is the presumed trajectory of the relationship.

Just as it is impossible to separate the vowed life from the CMT, so it is impossible to understand formation in the CMT without understanding its relationship to the Church.<sup>39</sup> For CMT the Church is the primary means through which Christ bears witness to the world. So, these communities believe the Holy Spirit has birthed them *for* the Church, as a gift *to* the Church.<sup>40</sup> Formation not only takes place within a specific community, but within the larger embrace and under the authority *of* the church. This has profound implications for the CMT understanding of formation, as it weds context and intent. Just as the shape of an ice cube is determined by the dimensions of the tray in which it is formed, so it is with the person in the process of formation. How

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<sup>38</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 63.

<sup>39</sup> Church as understood to be solely within the Roman Catholic communion.

<sup>40</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman-curia/congregations/ccsclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman-curia/congregations/ccsclife), “Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes”, p. 12.

they are formed will be determined by the context and purposes for which they are being formed.

The Church is understood to be the hub anchoring all Catholic monastic orders, providing both their DNA and their ongoing sustenance through the sacraments (particularly that of the Eucharist).<sup>41</sup>

By encompassing the orders of the CMT within the larger body of Christ, the Church also prevents and protects them from becoming entities worshipped, served and sacrificed for their own sakes. Instead, the story and gift of every order is held in the embrace of the larger story of the Church.<sup>42</sup> Though the charisms that define the orders are unique and distinct they are not separate from the life of the church, but rather a means of reflecting a particular aspect of Christ. The church is the tree and the monastic orders like branches stemming from the tree. The Holy Spirit is the source of life for the tree, which in turn supports and roots the branches. The branches produce fruit because of their relationship to the tree and the unifying purpose they share. The branches also bring life and vitality to the tree.

This, of course, means that should the tree become ill or weak the life within the branches will be affected. And here the analogy breaks down because the Holy Spirit has always used monastic communities to renew and reform the church throughout history. Despite the intimacy

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<sup>41</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife), “Directives of Formation in Religious Institutes”, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), p. 54.

and symbiosis of this relationship there exists a constant tension because the existence of monastic communities is not only meant to bear witness to a unique aspect of Christ, but to reform/renew the church.<sup>43</sup> But this work of renewal and reform is done within the church, not outside it. The larger story of the church stands in authority over the monastic orders, again preventing and protecting them from losing sight of the purposes of their gift.<sup>44</sup>

The relationship of the CMT with the Church is why, though monastic vows are made within the context of a specific order, they are legitimized and mandated under the authority of the Church. Consequently, it is understood those taking vows are not only committing their lives to Christ and to a community, but to the service and blessing of the Church, which is Christ's body. Thus, all of formation in the CMT is carried out in communion with the Church in order that Christ may be glorified in and through her, in the world.

*CMT and its Relationship to the World:*

To follow Christ means to be led into the world God so loves, but it also means sharing ever more consciously and concretely in the mystery

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>44</sup> Christine D. Pohl's discussion in "Recognizing the Blessing of Consistency" and "Patience and Accompaniment" speak to this idea of the church's role in protecting, anchoring, and providing coherence for life and *telos* of the monastic communities. See *Living into Community*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), p. 105-106.

of Christ suffering and death.<sup>45</sup> In coming to the world Jesus affirmed its value, but also its profound need. The CMT takes the need to follow Jesus into suffering and death, as well as his affirmation of the creation's worth and need, very seriously. Christ's life, lived in 'detached engagement', is the example the monastic tradition seeks to imitate.<sup>46</sup> This is why a considerable number of monastic traditions have Houses of Formation where those beginning their monastic journey are physically set apart, once again in the understanding that the intent of formation is deeply influenced by context and purpose. Therefore, the physical retreat from the day-to-day cares of the world, its demands and enticements, provides an environment for an intense period of reflection, study, and healing from the consequences of living in a broken world.

Houses of Formation come with the pragmatic acknowledgement that each person comes with a unique and complex package of family, cultural, and personal struggles, as well as gifts.<sup>47</sup> Under the careful, well-trained guidance of formation directors, each monastic is introduced to the rhythms of a life shaped by a particular charism, the liturgy, prayer, catechism, and surrender. This concentrated, intensified context is meant to provide uncluttered time for the monastic to both hear God and their own hearts, as they seek to discern their calling to community. The period spent in these early years of formation is a time of training in a

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<sup>45</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife), "Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes", p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

new way of life, so it is not merely six months or a year, but typically three years. In the CMT it is understood that forming new habits and ways of life is not done quickly, nor can it be rushed.<sup>48</sup>

This new way of living is understood and expressed within both apostolic and contemplative communities. The apostolic is perhaps more obvious to Protestant Evangelicals, as it is the aspect of Jesus' life we tend to focus on most. But the contemplative tradition is equally expressive of Christ's engagement with the world.

Although the idea of a contemplative community might be foreign to us, these communities provide us with the same kinds of insights we acquire about our home cultures and ourselves when we spend time living abroad. Following Christ's own example, we should not dismiss the significance and value of contemplation. I suspect it is a bias that has left us hamstrung. As James Houston has commented, "The general Protestant prejudice against the life of contemplation – being rather than doing for God – has left us with only limited spiritual resources for our 'Christian persons' to be transformed".<sup>49</sup> What might it also be costing us with regards to Christ's mission? Within the CMT following the contemplative way of Jesus is not seen as a rejection or fleeing from the world, but rather an imitation of his deep, loving, self-sacrificial embrace of it. Perhaps the simplicity of focus in the lives of these praying brothers

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> James M. Houston, *The Heart's Desire*, (Colorado: NavPress, 1996), p. 251.

and sisters might best be understood as the outrageous generosity of God, seeking to constantly undergird his people.

Just as our prejudices can hamper us, so too can the fact we have all been schooled in the ways of the world. The CMT recognizes that as a result there is an equally great need for our re-education, to learn what is *most true* and *most real* about the world. This re-education involves being immersed in the Word through meditation, the practice of *lectio divino*, and its regular use in the liturgy. Along with scripture, monastics read and learn about the traditions of the Church Fathers, study church doctrine/theology, and the particular history of the order's charism. Each of these elements is viewed as essential components of formation because they are believed to contribute to a deepening understanding of a way of life.<sup>50</sup>

But perhaps the most significant re-education is provided through following Jesus into the way of silence, solitude, and stillness. It is in these disciplines the monastic learns to listen and to hear God, to know his sufficiency and his provision.<sup>51</sup> These are disciplines antithetical to the constant noise, need for others, and busyness the world would have us believe is necessary to affirm our value and purpose. So, the way of Jesus

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<sup>50</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife), "Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes", p. 30-31.

<sup>51</sup> Henri Nouwen speaks of John Etudes words to him about solitude, "without solitude there can be no real people...the measure of your solitude is the measure of your capacity for communion...for intimacy with others..." *The Genesee Diary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1976). P. 31.

must be *learned*, which requires practice, habituation, and communal encouragement.

Finally, I think it is worth noting that though the goal of the formation process is the radical transformation of a person's life, no one tradition, 'process', or methodology can fully capture the unique work of '*metanoia*' the Holy Spirit seeks to do in each of our lives.<sup>52</sup> But I believe the longevity of monastic experience, along with the tradition's deep understanding of the relationship between how we are formed and the purposes for which we are being formed can provide us with rich resources in the context of this discussion.<sup>53</sup>

### **III. Works on Formation:**

a) Lawrence S. Cunningham, "The Way and the Ways: Reflections on Catholic Spirituality", in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed., Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, provides a brief historical survey of the highlights of spiritual formation from a Catholic perspective, which only served to deepen my conviction we have much to learn from our Catholic brothers and sisters about the inherent connection between our formation and our functionality as believers.

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<sup>52</sup> James M. Houston, "Is Spiritual Formation More Cultural Than Theo-Anthropological?- An Ongoing Dialogue," Paper given in Tribute to Dallas Willard, at Biola University, September 2013, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> I must also note the danger 'practices' themselves can pose, potentially causing the substitution of one set of idols for another.

Cunningham begins his work differentiating ‘The Way of Jesus’ from ‘The Ways’ various monastic communities sought to follow Jesus through their unique charism. Cunningham explains the traditional understanding of ‘The Way of Jesus’ and the various ‘Ways’ monastics sought to imitate Jesus are both understandably eschatological in orientation (p. 84).

To teach ‘The Ways’ of the monastic tradition and ‘The Way of Jesus’ precipitated the development of schools of formation. Both ‘The Way of Jesus’ and ‘The Ways’ of most traditional monastic communities are best characterized as ‘Ways of Dying’ to this world that we might truly live. Both are not only counter-cultural, but counter-intuitive and call those who would follow to a life time of conversion (p. 88-89).

**b) Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*** come to the issue of formation from a Protestant historical perspective, which I found particularly helpful as the majority of my historical reading on formation had come from the monastic tradition. The chapter I found most helpful was entitled, ‘The Implications of the Gospel’, in which the authors set out to decipher what they believed to be the foundational principles of Protestant formation (p. 109-120). Parrett and Kang decide on what they call ‘The Three Facets of the Faith’: learning, worship, and action and use the chapter to illustrate how each

facet of faith has been imparted historically, grounded biblically, implied throughout the wisdom literature, and incarnated in the life of Christ.

What I appreciate most from this work is the opportunity it affords me to acquire a better understanding of the historic patterns used by the Protestant church to form people in Christ. In light of the interest of my project, I found the focus on catechizing as the principle source of formation rather intriguing. Though I continue to be concerned with the Protestant Evangelical default to direct formation primarily towards cognitive faculties, I do think there is something about the practice of catechizing the contemporary church can learn from, and perhaps, recover as we seek to nurture the whole life of the body.

c) **David I. Smith** and **James K. A. Smith, ed.**, *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* is simply an excellent pedagogical resource for anyone trying to impart principles and practices of faith. Though the book does not address formation specifically it is worth reading merely for the strength of its philosophical discussion on what is required for any educative process to be effective.

Anyone familiar with Smith's other books will not be surprised to find this work advocating a position which asserts no principle worth learning comes without *practices*. Part of what makes Smith's work so appealing to me is his belief we *become* what we learn and what we learn is sourced from avenues far less concrete than books and classrooms. For

Smith the goal of Christian education must never be the mere transference of information, but always and only, transformation.

**d) James K. A. Smith's, *Desiring the Kingdom***, volume 1 in Smith's series on Cultural Liturgies, has had the most significant impact on my thinking about practices of faith. Smith's work here fuels my sense of urgency about the church's need to become as intentional in forming certain kinds of people as is the culture within which we live. It is Smith's recognition of the danger we face in failing to recognize what the market place has long known - the role our imaginations and desires play in forming our idea of what contributes to 'the good life' that likewise facilitated the design of this project.

Fundamental to this work is Smith's pedagogical theory that Evangelicals have tended to approach Christian education from a philosophical anthropology that has closer ties to a Cartesian view of human beings than a biblical one. Descartes' infamous "I think therefore I am," argues Smith, has led to the notion that the primary task of Christian education and formation reduces the Christian person to container for ideas and our faith to a set of ideas, principles, claims, and propositions to be known and believed.<sup>54</sup> With this perspective, the human person is flattened to no more than a "cerebral cortex on a stick". Yet the narrative, counters Smith, claims what we think comprises only a

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<sup>54</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 32.

piece of who we are. We are created as *embodied* creatures. Why then do we seek to educate and form such a small bit of who we are? Should our bodies not be taken into account in the process of our education and formation? Should our aim not be to form *the whole person* rather than merely the mind? What is needed to accomplish this task, argues Smith, is nothing less than the transformation of our imagination, not the saturation of our intellect.<sup>55</sup> And does this not have as much to do with our bodies as our minds? For is it not true that what we do with our bodies shapes what and how we think, thereby facilitating and making possible the renewal of our minds?

It is here I believe what Jonathan R. Wilson refers to as “robust” doctrine of creation, becomes critical.<sup>56</sup> Wilson posits it is partly as a result of the contemporary church’s lack of a robust understanding of the doctrine of creation that we suffer from what he calls a “low-grade gnostic infection”, an infection which presents itself most clearly in our lack of a theology of the human body.<sup>57</sup> In keeping with Smith’s challenge then, if what I think and do is all that I am, of what value is my body apart from the agency through which I attend to these activities? Here Wilson and Smith intersect, as both seek to alert the church to the fact without a proper value of the body we are weakened and vulnerable to not only the seduction of the mall, as Smith so eloquently

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<sup>55</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 34

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan R. Wilson, *God’s Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), viii.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

demonstrates,<sup>58</sup> but says Wilson, to anyone who tells us that our bodies need to look a certain way or be used for certain services.<sup>59</sup>

Who we are, the *whole* of us, is implicit to why we are. The ontological and teleological realities of the human person must be taken into account if we are to educate and form whole persons. This will require much more from the church than imparting information. It will require us to impart and facilitate physical practices that surreptitiously embed in us, through repeated participation in ritual and rhythms, all that is *most true* and *most real* about who we are and why we are.<sup>60</sup>

Smith says we are the sorts of animals whose orientation to the world is primarily shaped from the body up rather than from the head down. This means it is through our hearts that our minds are trained and taught to approach the world in certain ways, to value certain things, have certain goals, pursue certain dreams, and engage in certain projects.<sup>61</sup> Though Smith's thesis is describing the broader issue of the ways in which our liturgies shape and form us, it the physical aspects of our liturgies, practices in particular, that fascinate me.<sup>62</sup> It is these physical

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<sup>58</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2009), 93-110.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> I believe the Doctrine of Creation can provide us with rich resources for preparing believers so that they might encounter and respond to affliction faithfully. I owe an enormous debt to both the teaching and writings of Dr. Jonathan R. Wilson here. It is his work on the Doctrine of Creation that first alerted me to the necessity of recapturing the body's role in formation. (For a fuller discussion of my thinking in this regard, see Chapter 5.)

<sup>61</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2009), 25.

<sup>62</sup> Though I also worry we are experiencing a deficit in the teaching we are receiving within the wider Protestant Evangelical community. Here I am speaking of the absence of teaching which fails to deeply imbed us, and therefore our suffering, in God's grand story. Without this understanding of who we are and why we are our experiences of suffering only serve to

enactments or practices that create habits and environments, which contribute to a pedagogy that situates us in the world in a *certain* way and instruct us in a myriad of what Smith refers to as “precognitive” means to be a *certain* kind of person. It this not what God intended by the *Shema* when God called Israel to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”?

In thinking about the crux of this project, Smith’s work alerts us to the reality which becomes most apparent in the midst of a crisis. Seldom do we have the luxury of time to think, let alone the mental acuity to process our circumstances theoretically: it is our instincts and our muscle memory that largely take over. “Muscles memories” of faith, developed and facilitated through practices, are specifically what this project seeks to introduce to the church with the hope they might contribute to the church’s resources for forming believers who both anticipate suffering and are prepared to meet the difficulties it will present.

The only gap in Smith’s work, as far as I can tell, is the need to provide its biblical foundation. Though there is no doubt this work is thoroughly biblical, it would enrich his already brilliantly articulated argument to have it scripturally substantiated.

e) *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* edited

by **Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass** is a collection of essays all

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reinforce our sense of isolation, meaninglessness, and despair. We need to ‘re-member’ our suffering is not happening to us alone, nor are we without hope, or solely dependent on our own resources to meet its challenges.

seeking to articulate the intrinsic, dynamic relationship between practices and faith. As participation in practices makes available a distinct sort of knowledge, so the epistemological significance of our embodiment is not to be underestimated. As Bass states in the introduction to the book, “practices are not external to Christian beliefs and doctrine, but integral to them...”<sup>63</sup>

In my opinion, and for the purposes of this project, some of the best material in this collection comes from Bass and co-author Craig Dystra, in the book’s first essay entitled “A Theological Understanding of Practices”. Here the authors tease out this idea a little more fully:

“Christian practices address fundamental human needs and conditions. Christian practices, theologically understood, are directed to humanity’s most basic needs, needs that arise out of the very character of human existence. They address conditions fundamental to being human – such as embodiment, temporality, relationship, the use of language, and mortality – and they do so through concrete human acts joined inextricably to substantive convictions about how things really are”.<sup>64</sup>

Christian practices of faith are then not only intended to be formative, but to bear witness to the reality of God’s Kingdom. It is not surprising then there must be a diversity of faith practices if we are to attend to the *whole* of who are and why we are, thereby reflecting the social and historical aspects of our corporal nature.

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<sup>63</sup> Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 7.

<sup>64</sup> Craig Dystra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Practices,” in *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 22.

In “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology” Sarah Coakley harkens back to the wisdom to be gleaned from church history. Coakley suggests there is a “three-stage heuristic schema” to the relationship between belief and practices whose trajectory is the “progressive purification of the self so as to become transparent to the divine”.<sup>65</sup> In referencing the works of Clement, Benedict, and a conglomeration of Evagrius, Teresa, and St. John of the Cross respectively, Coakley seeks to represent aspects of practices corresponding to the appropriation of belief acquired in the progression of faith. But it is her middle section on Benedict and his *Rule* that I found most informative.

Coakley writes of Benedict’s innate understanding of the hidden efficacy of repeated practices in faith formation in his *Rule*, practices that intentionally both teach and embody belief.<sup>66</sup> Wisely insisting and situating practices within the *Rule* amongst the quotidian, “the pots and pans” ordinariness of life, Benedict maps a way of life intended to create a life habituated in the love of Christ both inwardly and outwardly.<sup>67</sup> The rule reflects Benedict’s unspoken understanding of the unconscious ways in which spiritual “re-modulation and transformation” may occur over a lifetime through repeated practices, alerting us (intentionally? Unintentionally?) to the significance of “disciplined repetition in the

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<sup>65</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” in *Practicing Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (2002), 90.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-87.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

fruitful interaction of belief and practice”.<sup>68</sup> Continuing to ponder the wisdom of Benedict, Coakley concludes there is value and integrity to physical acts of worship and attention, regardless of whether the mind is engaged. As anthropologist Talal Asad remarked, “unbelief can be more truly the effect of ‘untaught bodies’ than of uninstructed minds”.<sup>69</sup> I think anyone who sits down at the piano years after the painful lessons concluded will concur that muscle memory is hard to erase. Yet just as piano practice opens up the vocabulary of musical expression to even the least talented pianist, so it is with any pedagogy. Some insights are only available to us after repeated, habitual practices. This, Coakley points out, not only speaks to the unique epistemological capacity of our body, but to the mysterious action done to us by the work of the Holy Spirit in simply and repeatedly being receptive.<sup>70</sup>

One final comment I would like to make on this work is to salute its identification of the corporeal and historical nature inherent to Christian practices. Too often I fear we Protestant Evangelicals lose sight of the reality that these two aspects of our faith are not superfluous, but essential.

#### **IV. Works on the Nature of Suffering:**

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 88 quoting Talal Asad, “Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body,” in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 48.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

**a) Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *This is Not the Way It's Supposed to be* – A**

*Breviary of Sin* is not a work explicitly about suffering, but it speaks to

its very source. In the introduction, the author states,

“...the slippage in our consciousness of sin, like most fashionable follies, may be pleasant, but it is also devastating. Self-deception about our sin is a narcotic, a tranquilizing and disorienting suppression of our spiritual central nervous system.... when we lack an ear for wrong notes in our lives, we cannot play right ones or even recognize them in the performances of others...” (p. xiii).

I think this lack of a robust understanding of the *nature* of sin partly explains why it is the church fails to recognize the *consequences* of sin and fails so miserably in responding well to suffering. If we do not comprehend what sin is and what sin does to us how can we compassionately respond to its destructive impact in the lives of others? And if we do not properly comprehend sin, how do we comprehend grace? And if we are ignorant about sin and its impact on us how do we possibly grasp the true significance of the incarnation, the cross, or the resurrection? All of this leaves me wondering how much of our ignorance is connected to contemporary evangelical's lean doctrinal diet? Which might also explain our inability to recognize when we (let alone our culture) are drawing on aberrant sources for our identity and purposes and why it is so many of our culture's values seem innocuous and even 'right' to us. The lines of distinction between what brings life and what leads to death have become blurry to many of us, making the immediacy of comforts and consolations offered to us by our culture (most especially

when we are in pain) seem far more appealing than those unseen and which require faith and patience.

Plantinga says, “sin is never normal” (p. 5). Yet I fear it has become normalized, even in the church, because people do not seem to know what sin is. Like the rest of the world in the face of the suffering, I worry the majority of believers also shrug their shoulders in passive resignation and think life is just hard and ‘shit happens’. But the Bible tells us a different story. This is *not* how it was meant to be; this is *not* God’s intention for creation.

**b) Zygmunt Bauman’s, *Liquid Love***, though not written from a Christian understanding, provides extraordinarily insightful commentary on the kind of life and society sin produces, and therefore the context in which we are seeking to form people. Bauman reminds us that systematic analysis of suffering is critical if we are to avoid the danger of assuming all suffering is due to the individual rather than systemic realities and injustices. As he states in *Society Under Siege*, “Without this communal effort (of systemic analysis) it would be easy to give up working for social change and instead search for “individual, biographical solutions to systemic contradictions.”<sup>71</sup> This is a society marked by fragmentation, a blurring of distinctions, alienation, separation, and a rupturing of bonds between people, places, and purposes. Within such a society there is no permanence or consistency or faithfulness, because we are obsessed with

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<sup>71</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Society Under Siege* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 195.

choice, convenience, novelty, speed, efficiency, fluidity, and liquidity. We are no longer an anchored people because we have no coherent understanding of what is true, and noble, and meaningful. Instead we have become a people encouraged to create our own ‘truth’ and decide for ourselves what is meaningful. Nobility has become quaint antiquated notion to us and attributes like perseverance or patience are perceived as liabilities, except if they are proven to produce profit.

In this context, the only relationships of value are those which benefit *me* and provide *me* with instant gratification and are preferably refundable because we are a people who wear “light cloaks and condemn steel casings” (p. 47).

In this society, we consume and are consumed. This consumerism is not really about accumulating stuff, but it is about using and disposing of things and people in order to make room for new things and people (p. 49). Therefore, any dependent relationship, which could, “...thwart our autonomy, preferences, ambitions and call us to sacrifice, to less, to divided loyalties...” is a liability to be avoided at all cost (p. 43). Relationships are commodities too, valuable only for our use and disposal.

It goes to reason then; this is not a welcome context for the weak. Life in this domain is all about survival, remaining on the top of the pile, and protecting your position and purchasing power. Here victims of any sort are dismissed as minor irritants. Survival is the endgame and we are

“...apparently unscathed and untarnished by the inhumanity of a life dedicated to survival...a life worth pursuing for its own sake, however high...the costs paid by the defeated and however deeply and beyond repair this may deprive and degrade the victim” (p. 85). To perpetuate this attitude, we insist the vulnerable, those in need, and those who are suffering, be kept out of sight and quarantined to prevent confronting us with the real cost our choices produce (p. 98).

Yet this is also the world God so loved. And it is into this world Jesus has come and calls us to continue to go. Though Bauman is an astute observer he does not realize his observations are not *all* that is going on.

This world was created and intended for life and love, to flourish, not to be consumed and discarded. Though I doubt Bauman would go so far as to recognize it is God that is missing from the mix, I do think he understands a society without bonds of communal care and commitment is unsustainable, and will inevitably cannibalize itself. Incisively he notes for me to love myself, or to love another, first requires that I have been loved and therefore have love to offer. “In order to have self-love, we need to be loved...(therefore) a refusal to love breeds self-hatred...others must first love us so we can begin to love ourselves” (p. 85). But Bauman fails to address the inevitable question implied by his observations - where does the source of this love originate? Who initiates loving in the first place?

c) **Jean Leclercq**, *Approaches to the Cross*, is typical of all his work – worth the read. I found chapter four to be the most fruitful for my interest because in it he surveys the uses Christianity has for suffering. The opening line is indicative of his position, “The problem of suffering is above all a Christian one. Apart from Christianity, suffering is absurd, purely and simply bad; and must be eliminated without delay” (p. 42). As Leclercq points out, because of Christ’s passion suffering has become a remedy above all other, even a sign of moral health. Yet because suffering’s source is sin there is both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ suffering. “In order to be good, suffering must be separated from sin and placed at the service of love” (p. 44) because “...suffering is of no importance except as a testimony of love” (p. 46).

Though there is a certain lack of compassion for the sufferer in Leclercq’s work, because of suffering’s ‘usefulness’ in our spiritual education, I also think this is why I need to go back and reread this book. There is steeliness and an unflinching fearlessness about Leclercq’s attitude towards suffering I want to better understand and his rich historical familiarity with monastic tradition and its practices of spiritual formation only further recommend his work to me.

d) **Dorothy Soelle’s** *Suffering* has been a rich resource for my thinking about suffering for several years now. There is so much to recommend

this work, but of particular interest to me is Soelle's thinking about the meaning of suffering and under which conditions suffering can make us more human. She contends "...whoever deals with his personal suffering only in the way our society has taught him – through illusion, minimization, suppression, apathy – will deal with societal suffering in the same way" (p.4). It is this concise correlation between our personal and public attitude towards suffering I find most helpful and most pertinent to the discussion about suffering's role in our spiritual formation.

I am also deeply appreciative of Soelle's stern unyielding theological chastisement of all who espouse the idea that God is the source of our suffering. In fact, she goes so far as to label this belief "Christian Masochism" (p. 17) and "theological sadism" (p.22). In *Suffering* Soelle calls the church to turn its back on this masochistic, sadistic posture towards suffering (and therefore those who suffer) not only because it perpetuates a false and horrific perception of God as one "who only becomes great when he makes us small" (p.19), but because it encourages the suppression of suffering's social dimensions.

Theological distortions of suffering's source and its value, according to Soelle, end up causing the church to esteem what our culture esteems: strength and the ability to endure. This in turn creates a culture within the church, just as it does in society, where there is little to no sensitivity for the suffering of others (p. 22). In this vein, Soelle warns,

“...in the face of suffering you are either with the victim or the executioner – there is no other option” (p. 32). Wow! But after spending time with participants of this project, some of whom have been forced into solitude because of their suffering, I cannot dismiss Soelle easily. She goes on to say any “...explanation of suffering that looks away from the victim and identifies...with a righteousness that is supposed to stand behind the suffering has already taken a step in the direction of theological sadism, which wants to understand God as the torturer...” (p. 32). These are harsh words, but do they not echo the cries of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself when he says, “in *everything* do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12, emphasis mine). We become what we worship so our understanding of God’s nature is crucial and most honestly reflected, I believe, in our response to suffering (p. 43).

If there is any critique of *Suffering* I can offer, it is only that Soelle seems reluctant to acknowledge the element of mystery surrounding suffering. The mystery we cannot help but sense when we read Job or the story of Abraham offering Isaac or ponder the cry of Jesus’, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” But her prophetic understanding of the church’s response to suffering and in turn its effect on the mission of the church means *Suffering* is worthy of our time, especially in thinking about suffering and formation.

e) **Scott Cairns**, *The End of Suffering* begins his work, “I...feel a pressing need to mitigate some of the nonsense that we habitually lay on the invisible God” regarding the sources of our suffering (p. xi). He then proceeds, as N. T. Wright does in *Evil and the Justice of God*, to respond to the issues of evil and suffering by diving into the theological territory of the doctrine of creation, surmising suffering, “...compels us to take stock, to ask and enquire of the bigger picture... (with questions such as) why? Why are we even here? What is the point and purpose of life?” (p. 7).

Cairns’ work is best described as an exploration of the nature of suffering which seeks to orient the church towards the ways Jesus met its challenges. It is no figure of speech, Cairns emphatically notes, the church is referred to as Christ’s body, which should further recommend Christ’s response to suffering to us. For in suffering Jesus joins himself to us, therefore we are now joined to one another and it is in our shared experience of suffering a fellowship is created between us, a compassion and empathy for one another that is deepened as suffering reveals our common fragility, vulnerability, dependencies, and need....” (p. 60)

Again, insisting we grapple with the social realities of our suffering, Cairns states we cannot turn away from another who is suffering without turning away from God, nor can we turn away from God without likewise turning away from one another (p. 62). Both responses cause isolation, which in light of the Trinitarian nature of our

ontology, is a violation of our personhood. We have been created *for* relationship and *from* relationship. We need one another, which is why it is impossible not to hear echoes of Jesus' words, "*Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me*" (Matt. 25:45). "What," Cairns then asks, "is our complicity in one another's pain?" because he believes our response to suffering is inherently correlated to our humanity (p. 62).

This work is a reaffirmation of the principle, "*unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*" (Jn. 12:24), for it is in the giving not in the saving of ourselves that we and all creation find life, just as Jesus' example demonstrated for us. This then is how the body of Christ bears witness to the redemptive work of God and how our faith is meant to connect us *to* each other, and how we connect each other *to* our faith (p. 77) ...as we are formed, so shall we function.

**f)** In Douglas John Hall's work, *God and Human Suffering*, I found a refreshingly honest exploration of the poignant nature of suffering.<sup>73</sup> In addition, I appreciated Hall's incisive criticisms of the most common responses to suffering: cynicism, credulity, and stoicism. Hall contrasts each of these familiar reactions with God's response as Emmanuel. The cynic's posture towards suffering, says Hall, is dishonest because it

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<sup>73</sup> Hall, Douglas John. *God and Human Suffering*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.

distorts reality by failing to take into account all that is beautiful, good, and full of wonder in the world in addition to all that is not (p. 20). The credulous are willfully blind to human suffering and must be in order to maintain their point of view (p. 21). Further on in the work Hall dismisses the perspective of the stoics who insist “to be is to suffer,” therefore, we need to simply buck up and deal with it (p. 52).

Hall presents a sound biblical retort to these common, but mistaken responses to suffering by explicating the radical nature of the Christian message. Hall insists the gospel is a proclamation that suffering is real, but it is not all that there is, nor is it inherent to creation. But suffering is taken so seriously by God, God freely and fully enters into it with us (p. 35). As Hall states,

“...the theology of Bethlehem and Golgotha...directs us from the lonely morbid contemplation of our own real suffering to the suffering of God in solidarity with us...not through power but through participation, not through might but through self-emptying...” (p. 113)

Hall rightly asserts that biblical tradition defies those who would seek to distort, deny, or minimize the reality of suffering and chastises those, particularly in the church, who would perpetuate the damage done by such responses (p. 35-43).

I also appreciate the strong argument Hall builds for the connection that must exist between theology and ethics if the gospel message is to truly be believed (p. 120-24). Hall advocates for a position which says when we minimize or dismiss suffering because we cannot face it, we

fear it or worry about what it says about God (and our own vulnerability) we proclaim God's absence, God's distance from us, and God's disinterest in our affairs while simultaneously declaring God's inability to handle our agony, our lament, doubt, and despair. By doing so are we suggesting God wants less than this from us because he is not capable of managing our affliction? This caricature of God portrays God like a little old lady needing help to cross the street. Likewise, it suggests our suffering is beyond God's ability or desire to heal or redeem. If this is the case, then we should all be very afraid for we are truly alone (p. 124-27).

The author also suggests something that was new to me. Hall believes that there are two types of suffering in creation: integrative and disintegrative. He describes integrative suffering as implicit to creation and therefore present before the fall, such as loneliness, limitations, temptation and anxiety. Integrative suffering is that which serves in creation's flourishing and abundance whereas disintegrative suffering is that which Genesis 3 calls cursed because it does not serve creation but destroys it (p. 62-64).

I find this idea intriguing, though I wonder why he failed to mention death as a form of suffering before the fall, as it is necessary for the health of nature's entire ecosystem. Yet there is still something to his proposal that I would like to give it more thought.

Though Hall does good work in his discussion of the nature of suffering and explicating the biblical response to it in the incarnation and

crucifixion, he denies what seems to me to be the most significant response of all, and the trajectory of the incarnation and the crucifixion – the resurrection and the very *telos* of creation – *new creation*. Hall refers to this reality as, “...the Christian propensity to give the story an ending – and a very happy ending at that – (and it) may well be related to the Christian reluctance to participate in the story...” (p.141) But isn’t this what he is advocating for when he insists that the Christian theology can never be divorced from ethics, from incarnation? While I agree that the church may be motivated out of a lack of desire to participate, we do, thank God, have the assurance that the ‘end’ is indeed ‘happy’ as it has been the whole point from the very beginning! It is *new creation*, a new beginning, the *telos* of creation and the very reason for Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Hall seems to suggest that liberals view Paul’s ‘joy in suffering’ as questioning their bourgeois optimism while it secretly annoys the conservatives, “who prefer an undialectical happy ending to the story...a return to Paradise through the resurrection from the dead” (p.143). But I don’t think Hall can have it both ways. The good news is not just the incarnation and crucifixion – it *is* the resurrection for it is the resurrection that gives meaning and purpose and proclaims the *intention* of Christ’s life and his death. It is the fact that our creator *is* our redeemer and that this present suffering does not compare to the glory that awaits us in *new creation* when we shall see God as he is and been made wholly holy together with him.

g) I also appreciated the no-nonsense work of **Stanley Hauerwas** in both *Naming the Silences (NS)* and *Suffering Presence (SP)*.<sup>74</sup> What I appreciate about both of these books is the author's relentless insistence on the historically situated and physically experienced nature of suffering. There is no room for romanticized notions of suffering here, nor is there any time given for suffering to be merely a metaphysical problem for Christians to 'explain', or worse to excuse. Like Hall, Hauerwas insists that very attempt to do anything other than wail, lament, and rage against suffering's presence stands in stark contrast to biblical tradition (*NS*, p. 34-37, 78-84).

But I think what I most appreciate about these works of Hauerwas is his insistence the only way to respond to suffering is not through our words or ideas, but through the church, the Word's physical presence among us. It is the church that is Christ's body, "a community of care that has made it possible...to absorb the destructive terror of evil that constantly threatens to destroy all human relations" (*NS*, p. 53, 85-89). Because it is only Christ that can bear the suffering of the world, so it is only Christ's body that can truly respond to suffering's persistent, agonizing presence. As such, it is this community Hauerwas refers to as the *Suffering Presence*, which he believes to be the necessary compliment to medical professionals in their care for the sick. "The

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<sup>74</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley. *Naming the Silences*. New York: T & T Clark, 1990 and Hauerwas, Stanley. *Suffering Presence*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986.

church is called to be a body - to embody the presence of God - God who is always present to us..." (SP, p. 80). It is Christ's suffering presence with us which enables us to be present in suffering for one another. It is only a community whose existence is a gifted one, birthed out of the acknowledgement of its own neediness and dependency on God that can truly care for others. As Hauerwas rightly states, "caring is the antithesis of simply using the other person to satisfy one's own needs" (SP, p. 95). To care for another demands selflessness that is not natural, except for a people whose way of life exists because of the selflessness of God in Christ (SP, p. 85). It is in and through the community of believers who comprise Christ's body that the world encounters love and healing and hope, "by helping us discover that our lives are located in God's narrative – the God who has not abandoned us" (NS, 67). Hauerwas reiterates our need for, and the significance of, a robust doctrine of creation within the church.

I think Hauerwas is correct about the role of the church. But how do we form believers who are willing to live this dialectical way of life? How do we form believers who are willing to acknowledge both our vulnerability and our need, while celebrating the reality and the truth of God's presence with and for us – *so that* others can do likewise?

### **CHAPTER 3:**

#### **The Act of Ministry**

This project, entitled, “Practices to Facilitate Faith Amidst Suffering” was designed and implemented to answer the question: “*In what ways might six weeks of practicing storytelling and the Examen*”

*provide suffering believers the opportunity to encounter the incarnational presence of God, thereby providing them with resources with which to meet the challenges of their suffering in faith?"* As the primary lived experience of suffering and prayer is being studied, a qualitative research methodology was employed. More specifically, it is the methodology of 'Narrative Inquiry' advocated by Clandinin and Connelly in their work, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*.<sup>75</sup>

Within the context of this chapter the project parameters will be outlined. This will include a description of the participants and of the researcher; the context for the project; details of the project's implementation; a description of the multiple methods of data collection utilized; and the process of data analysis and evaluation employed. The chapter concludes with observations on the limitations of the project's design and implementations.

### **I. Participants:**

There were three female participants in the project. The women were 48, 52, and 54 years old respectively. Two participants were married and one was a recent widow. Two women were Canadian born and the third was born in the United States, but has resided in Canada for

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<sup>75</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

the last 30 years. All three women are Caucasians. Two of the three participants have undergraduate degrees, with the third graduating from high school. All three women would be considered middle class Canadians. Two participants were raised in Christian families and one came to faith at 20 years old. All three women self-identified as ‘evangelical’, which for the purposes of this project refer to an adherence to the Nicene Creed, belief the Bible is God’s Word, and the understanding God invites and enables us to come into a personal relationship with God through God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

Everyone was new to the Ignatian *Examen* and to the intentional invitation of telling the whole story of their suffering, not merely extracted anecdotes.

Two of the participants worked full-time outside the home and one participant was a stay-at-home mom. Of the working participants, one woman was a Gr. 1 teacher at a private Christian school and the other a business owner of a mid-sized company. Each of the participants have children ranging in ages from 16 to 22 years old.

Of the participants, one woman was previously well known to the researcher, another was an acquaintance, and the third had been referred by a mutual friend. All three women had also participated in an earlier contextual praxis with the researcher and had expressed interest in being involved in further research projects. The women were therefore

acquainted with one another before this project commenced, but had only met through their participation in the previous project.

## **II. The Researcher:**

Throughout the last five years I have been asked by individual believers facing various forms of suffering to enter into spiritual friendship with them in the midst of their suffering. Each was seeking supportive spiritual accompaniment to try and meet the challenges affliction was presenting to them, with faith.

Though I am not formally affiliated with an institution, I am in regular contact with professional counselors, pastors, and mature Spiritual Directors in order to draw on their counsel, training, and experience. I am an amateur in the truest sense of the word. As Margaret Guenther states, "...the amateur is one who loves, loves the art that she serves, loves and prays for the people who trust her, loves the Holy Spirit who is the true director in this strange ministry..."<sup>76</sup> But I do stand and practice such spiritual friendship within the biblical tradition of those who seek to comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God, referred to by Paul in 2 Cor. 1:3-7. In this regard, I also stand and practice in the broad historical tradition of spiritual friendship, perhaps best demonstrated by the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the monastic tradition. These were men and women who freely offered what

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<sup>76</sup> Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Lanham, Maryland: The Rowan & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 1992), 1.

they had been given by God to anyone who came seeking. Like these traditions, I too believe individuals need accompaniment and encouragement to recognize and respond to God's presence and work in their lives, most especially in the midst of affliction.

I have also been the beneficiary of this same gift of spiritual friendship for the past 28 years from Dr. James Houston. Dr. Houston was the academic supervisor for my Masters of Christian Studies degree in spiritual theology from Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. In describing the nature of spiritual friendship, Dr. Houston quotes the fourteenth century English mystic, Richard Rolle, who states, "Holy friendship truly is of God, that amid the wretchedness of this exile, we be comforted with the counsel of friends until we come to him".<sup>77</sup>

My own experience of suffering in the past 23 years has also facilitated an acute awareness believers have, especially those who are facing affliction, for friends like those described in Luke 5:18; friends who are willing to carry us to Jesus.

Within the context of providing spiritual friendship to suffering believers I draw heavily upon the Ignatian prayer practice of the *Examen*. The intention of the *Examen* flows from principles of Ignatian spirituality, which emphasizes the presence and agency of God in all of life. The *Examen* is a prayer practice designed to facilitate this awareness by teaching believers to recognize God's specific presence and agency in

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<sup>77</sup> James M. Houston, *The Transforming Friendship* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing Corp., 1989), 227.

their lives. It is ultimately a practice of discernment through which believers receive assurance and affirmation their lives are a part of the very life and purposes of God. The practice itself consistently offers believers a great source of comfort, but perhaps it is most appreciated in the midst of affliction.

### **III. The Context of the Project:**

All participants live in Calgary, Alberta. The individual interviews in which the practice of storytelling was conducted, took place in several locations, each chosen by the participants. One interview was conducted in the participant's home, another in my home office, and the final interview took place in a large coffee shop. Each of the weekly gatherings took place on Monday evenings from 7-8:30pm in my home in Calgary. The entire project ran from Monday, March 29, 2016 through to Monday, April 18, 2016.

### **IV. The Project:**

#### ***a) Preparations***

After I concluded my contextual praxis in December 2015 I informed the participants I would be doing further research in 2016 should any of them be interested in participating. Six women indicated interest. In January 2016, I followed up with each of these six women to

verify their interest. At this point three women withdrew. I then sent a formal email letter to the remaining women outlining the nature and parameters of the project, “Practices to Facilitate Faith Amidst Suffering” (see Appendix 1).

The letter addressed the commitments required of participants, specifically that they would be willing to tell the story of their suffering to the researcher twice. The opportunity to share their story would occur prior to, and again after, six weekly gatherings of a group practice of the *Examen*.<sup>78</sup> As I presumed the *Examen* would be unfamiliar to most I included a brief description of the practice (see Appendix 2). The letter went on to state the time commitments as follows: the individual storytelling meetings would take approximately 1-1.5 hours each and the weekly gatherings to practice the *Examen* would take 1.5 hours per week, for a period of six weeks. Respondents were asked to provide options for two potential evenings they had free with hopes of finding one evening in common for three all participants. The letter informed participants this was a research project, and as such, they could be assured of confidentiality and all data collected would be used for the sole purposes of the research project.

When I received affirmative responses, and determined what evening was suitable for everyone, I sent out another email confirming the dates, time, and location for the weekly gatherings. I also asked if

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<sup>78</sup> In order to assist participants in telling their story a set of semi-structured interview questions was used (see Appendix 4).

they could provide me with a date, time, and place to do our first individual meeting in the week prior to the commencement of the weekly gathering. At each of the individual meetings the participants signed the Letter of Participation giving their consent to partake in the project (see Appendix 1). At the conclusion of the sixth weekly gathering I set up the final individual meetings with each participant.

## **V. The Practices:**

### **a) *Rationale for Storytelling:***

The practice of storytelling was chosen for several reasons. First, we live our lives narratively. We live lives situated in time and space, with our past and present informing our understanding of our future. Our lives are lived in a chronological trajectory and are full of characters, contexts, and events. As believers, those aware of God's grand meta-narrative, we are deeply formed and informed by this. And it is primarily through the genre of story, recorded in both the New and Old Testaments, God has chosen to communicate *The Story* to us. Scripture tells us *The Story* of creation, redemption, and new creation through the narrative of God's relationship with the nation of Israel, culminating in God coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus too, favoured stories as a means to instruct, to teach, and to help people see and understand who God is and who they are.

Unlike lectures or sermons, stories engage more than our cognitive faculties; stories engage and activate our imaginations, our senses, our emotions, our reasoning, and our will in ways other forms of communication do not. Story draws us together and builds bridges between us. As Nish Weiseth states, "...stories change us in ways that debates and statistics never will".<sup>79</sup>

This was an important element of why I wanted to introduce this practice, as I believe so much of what is offered to believers as resources for dealing with suffering is directed at the intellect. Ironically, in the midst of affliction it is this particular faculty which is most often incapacitated. Therefore, it was my desire to introduce believers to other means of preparing for the challenges of suffering – means that would involve them in embodied rather than just didactic practices. It was my hope such practices might also initiate a reversal of the deepening divide experiences of suffering can cause between our minds, hearts, and bodies.<sup>80</sup>

The practice of storytelling was also intended to convey an invitation, a welcoming, and valuing of the stories each participant has lived. It is also a social practice, which I believe is an essential

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<sup>79</sup> Nish Weiseth, *Speak: How Your Story Can Change the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 16.

<sup>80</sup> In earlier research, several participants made references to experiencing a tremendous conflict between the way they *thought* they should be responding to suffering and how their *bodies* were actually dealing with it. Over time the discrepancy between the two caused some participants to try and 'bury' their feelings or to attribute physical ailments to anything other than the stress suffering was inflicting on them for fear it indicated some deficiency in their faith. See E. Ann Thakkar, unpublished, "A Resource for Hope Amidst Suffering" (Vancouver, BC: Carey Theological College, 2015.)

component required if we are to draw believers out of the isolation suffering produces. Suffering does not occur in isolation, therefore its healing cannot either. Thus, the sharing of our stories with one another can dislodge suffering from the center of our narratives and push it to the periphery as we remember we are a person whose identity is not determined by our circumstances but our Creator.

Stories also allow for the reflective fluidity that the passage of time and acquisition of new data can cause, which thereby leads us to re-evaluate and sometimes even re-narrate the meaning or significance of people, experiences, or events in our lives. Similarly, stories invite us into the narratives of the other, enabling us to entertain possibilities, dreams, and hopes for ourselves and the future by allowing us to see ourselves and our circumstances differently, through the lens of the other's experience. In doing so, stories can not only facilitate a transformation of our futures, but alter our perception and understanding of the past as well. Part of this transformation occurs because stories circumvent the impersonal removed stance of the 'objective' and bring us into the heart of the person. This is what we saw Jesus do with people over and over again. Jesus always cared far more for people than he did for policy. Might this not be why he told stories of his own, stories which constantly addressed and revealed both the heart of the matter, and the heart of those listening?<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Nish Weiseth, *Speak: How Your Story Can Change the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 43.

Story draws us together by building bridges across the distances we have created between us, distances we think will keep us safe, but instead have kept us lonely.<sup>82</sup> What we discover in hearing one another's story is what we all hunger to be assured of – that we are not alone in our suffering, our fears, our disappointments, hopes, and dreams. In listening to one other's stories we bear witness to what they have experienced and we enter into these experiences with them. In one another's stories, we hear words that have the power to bring us untold comfort; the words are simply, "me too". But we do not know this is so unless one has the courage and vulnerability required to extend the invitation to the other to tell their story, and the other has the courage and willingness to be vulnerable enough to do so.<sup>83</sup> As Weiseth's says, "...these shared stories and this retelling of ourselves are the things that build relationships..." and love between people.<sup>84</sup>

Telling our story engages us in the act of remembering and the act of remembering also enables us to fold pain and trauma into our life with God. In scripture this act is considered so vital we are told to 'remember' approximately 166 times.<sup>85</sup> Why? I believe as we remember we recall and rehearse God's past faithfulness. In doing this we are encouraged and

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> I want to insert a note of caution here. Suffering narratives must be invited only with careful concern for the purposes for doing so. I fear re-victimizing can easily occur if the 'novelty' or 'shock value' of the story is valued above the person telling the story.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>85</sup> Referenced from <https://truthinreality.com>, accessed June 8, 2016.

emboldened to believe God shall continue to be faithful. Remembering therefore births hope in us.

Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, in her work reflecting on the Massacre at El Mozote, in El Salvador, believes the act of remembrance, specifically that of suffering, facilitates hope in several ways.<sup>86</sup> Gandolfo says remembering interrupts our prevailing conceptions of reality and history; empowers the formation of our individual and communal identity; nurtures a new moral imagination and vision for an alternate future; and inspires emancipatory action in the present on behalf of the future.<sup>87</sup> Remembering is a powerful, integral part of the formation of believers, both as individuals and as communities of hope because our stories of suffering are always linked to hope for and the promise of a future in which suffering will be no more.<sup>88</sup>

But to remember is also an act of courage, particularly to remember our suffering. By doing so we refuse to deny or minimize or forget what has happened. This serves to not only reinforce our dignity and the significance of our experiences, but it is also a declaration of our trust in God's refusal to silence or hide our suffering and in God's power and desire to intervene and redeem it.

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<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo. 2013. "Remembering the Massacre at El Mozote: A Case for the Dangerous Memory of Suffering as Christian Formation in Hope." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17, no. 1: 62-87. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLA Serials*, EBSCO host (accessed Mar. 14, 2016).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

Though the act of listening and telling our stories may sound simple, it is not easy. There is risk inherent in this practice for both the hearer and the teller. In listening to the other we risk being beckoned into response and engagement. Likewise, in telling our stories we risk being rejected and betrayed. Yet is this not what it means to love one another?

But the practice of storytelling was primarily selected because of the inherent value each of our lives has because God uniquely, intentionally, lovingly created us in God's own image. Therefore, our lives, along with the suffering we have experienced are unique vehicles which reveal aspects of God's person, purposes, and agency to the church and to the world. So, we *need* to hear one another's stories and we *need* to tell our stories. Both acts provide fuel for our faith, hope, and love to grow, which in the midst of affliction is perhaps required most of all.

Sadly, this is not the message many contemporary Evangelical Protestants have received. Many are not invited to share their stories, particularly if their story involves suffering, unless these stories have triumphant, miraculous, tidy 'conclusions'. Consequently, I not only wanted to acknowledge the value of these believer's stories, but to encourage and assure them their stories are rich resources for the church and the world because they bear witness to God's faithfulness to us, even in the midst of adversity.

In the sharing of their stories, I hoped to provide believers with the opportunity to remember God's presence and agency in their lives so

they might receive comfort, encouragement, and hope for God's continued faithfulness. I trusted they in turn would be able to console others in affliction with the consolation with which (they have themselves) received from God (see II Cor. 1:4).

Telling our stories is not enough to recommend this practice as a facilitator of faith. Plenty of 'reality' TV and TV talk shows demonstrate the destructive impact storytelling can have when the context, purpose, and audience is not considered. This is why I have coupled the practice of storytelling with the practice of the *Examen*.

**b) *Rationale for the Examen:***

As the *Examen* is primarily a practice of discernment it is one means by which believers can come to learn how to recognize and detect God's presence and agency in their lives. In the midst of affliction many voices vie for attention, voices that seek to incite fear, doubt, inappropriate judgments of people, ourselves, and circumstances etc. Through practicing the *Examen* believers come to identify voices other than God's simply because God's voice becomes so familiar. I John 4:1 cautions us, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God..."<sup>89</sup> Becoming familiar with God's voice is not, of course, isolated to the *Examen*. Rather it works in conjunction with the Spirit's ministry of revelation to us as we study the

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<sup>89</sup> Preston Yancey, *Out of the House of Bread*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 43.

Scriptures; amidst our fellowship with other believers; and in our ongoing engagement with Sacraments.<sup>90</sup>

The practice of the *Examen* also facilitates the believer's *expectation* and *anticipation* of God's voice and agency in their lives. In the midst of affliction, this practice can then offer believers assurance and affirmation that they are not facing their suffering alone, nor are they solely dependent on their own resources to meet the challenges of their circumstances. Similarly, the *Examen* can then become a means through which God is given the opportunity to remind the believer, even amidst suffering, that their life remains a part of the very life and purposes of God.<sup>91</sup>

This prayer practice invites the believer to see her life as a whole, not just episodically. It can therefore, be a provision of encouragement for the believer to recognize that their suffering is not all that is occurring in their life. Nor does their suffering isolate them from continuing to be a part of God's redemptive work in the rest of creation.

Part of what makes Ignatian Spirituality unique, and which recommends the *Examen* to believers as a resource with which to meet the challenges of suffering, is Ignatius' belief that our senses can provide passage into the mysteries of Christ's life.<sup>92</sup> Ignatius challenged believers not to be afraid of their senses or emotions, but rather to bring them to

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>91</sup> <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen> Retrieved Feb. 12, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Gloria Hutchinson, *Six Ways to Pray from Six Great Saints*, (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2015), 56

bear on their prayer life.<sup>93</sup> The *Examen* is then a practice through which the believer can become familiar with the deeper aspects of their emotional life, under the guidance and tutelage of the Holy Spirit. The *Examen* invites us into what Aschenbrenner refers to as the ‘sorrow place’ of the heart. It is not an easy place to go because “it is like a haunted house in the neighborhood of all our hearts”.<sup>94</sup> This is the place in our hearts, says Aschenbrenner, which is inhabited by the guilt, shame, failure, sorrow, and inadequacy that we keep deeply buried. It is the source of much fear in us and that which perpetually makes us feel as though we teeter on the precipice of helplessness and despair.

Consequently, most of us have learned to avoid visiting this place at all costs. But this is the very place where God seeks to bring God’s peace and the forgiving, transformative love of Jesus. To keep such a place in our hearts is to keep part of ourselves ‘boarded up’ and cut off from the love and life of God.

The existence of this ‘sorrow place’ only serves to perpetuate fragmentation, disconnection, and a nagging sense of disquiet in us, all of which fuels death’s destructive forces to remain active in our lives. Through the practice of prayer, such as the *Examen*, the Holy Spirit is afforded the opportunity to assure us of God’s loving disposition towards us, that God is *for* us not against us. As we are continually exposed to

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<sup>93</sup> This aspect of Ignatian Spirituality is perhaps best illustrated through the *Exercises*.

<sup>94</sup> George Aschenbrenner, S. J., foreword to *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today*, by Timothy M. Gallagher, O. M. V. (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2006), 12.

God's great love, light and hope can come to this dark, shadowy place in us and enable us to more clearly recognize God's presence and agency in our lives and in all of creation.<sup>95</sup>

Over time, through the *Examen*, the Holy Spirit is given space to reveal the mysteries of the believer's heart to her as well. Gently the Spirit comes to help her to recognize all the emotions she has hesitated to acknowledge to herself, let alone to God. Slowly the Spirit shows her that her many fears, insecurities, anger, frustrations, and lust are already known to God. In this way, the believer comes to believe in the truth and reality of God's acceptance and affection, as the Spirit is given regular opportunity to speak deeply to the core of the believer about the faithful, trustworthy, infinite abundance of God's love for them. Here the believer can begin to experience their life truly becoming anchored in the love of God.<sup>96</sup> Father George Aschenbrenner, SJ says, through the practice of the *Examen* believers become aware of the Father's continual desire to draw them nearer through Jesus Christ. The Spirit does this by intimately revealing who God is and what God is saying and doing both in and through the believer and their circumstances.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>96</sup> As the work of Charles Taylor so cogently argues, it is the perception of God's agency that is disappearing from the world, but without it what hope do we have in our suffering being redeemed? See *Modern Social Imageries* and *A Secular Age*.

<sup>97</sup> <http://www.diocese.cc/upload/images/originals/Examen070510A.pdf>, Retrieved Feb. 12, 2016.

Through such practices, God can establish poignant and powerful means of soothing and comforting us in the chaos and confusion suffering so often introduces into our lives.

Our lives are part of God's grand meta-narrative. Therefore, it is only within this context that we can know what is *most* real and *most* true about our lives, and what is happening apart from what our senses communicate to us. This is critical, but perhaps never more critical than in the midst of adversity. The practice of the *Examen* is then intended to help us bring our story before God and invite God to re-narrate our stories by revealing to us where God has been in the midst of our suffering and what God was doing. In this way, we come to see we have never been abandoned or forsaken by God, rather God was with us, even in our times of affliction. Slowly we are provided with a renewed sense of hope and a more true, more real perspective on our stories. We come to see that our suffering and our lives have not been unfolding in isolation because our lives, our stories, are a part of God's Story. Therefore, the trajectory of our stories is the trajectory of God's Story. Now suffering can no longer dominate or overshadow our narrative because suffering does not dominate or overshadow God's Story. Instead the hope of the gospel becomes our hope too!

When we begin to see God's presence within our narratives we become aware of the reality that our stories are not dependent solely on our agency or the scarcity and limitation of our resources. Likewise, we

begin to see our stories, even those of our suffering, are a part of the redemptive purposes of God because they bear witness to God's redemptive power. The *Examen* can play a central role in our appropriation and ability to live in and out of the Story and our new identity in Christ. <sup>98</sup>

The specific practice of the *Examen* is intended to teach us how to discern God's presence and agency in the midst of our day to day lives. This practice is meant to anchor our lives by anchoring us in the heart and love of God. The *Examen* is a very simple practice, accessible to all. It is designed to facilitate our awareness of God's desire to disclose God's self to us, and God's desire for us to do the same. It is a "a way of praying that opens our eyes to God's daily self-revelation and increasingly clarifies for us our own responses to it". <sup>99</sup> But perhaps most significantly, through the *Examen* we "become more aware of God's continual giving to us in so many ways during the day. Slowly, the gifts begin to speak to (us) of a very real love behind the giving" and it is this love I longed for these afflicted women to encounter most of all. <sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>99</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, OMV, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today*, (New York, NY: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2006), 21.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

## **VI. Implementing the Practices:**

### **a) *Storytelling***

The practice of storytelling involved meeting with each participant individually, both before our six weeks of gathering together commenced, and immediately thereafter. These individual meetings provided participants with the opportunity to tell the full narrative of their suffering journey to the researcher alone. Two of three of these meetings were conducted in my home office. I wanted to ensure privacy and provide participants with the safest, least intimidating atmosphere possible in which to share aspects of their lives that might prove challenging and painful to articulate. One participant was recovering from an illness, so I agreed to meet her at her home when we would be assured no one else would be present.

The ‘one on one’ nature of these meetings permitted the participants to be unconcerned about monopolizing group time (a fear expressed by one participant) and also enabled them to speak without worry about how their stories would be received by other participants (a concern expressed by two participants, as both had been told their stories were “too much”, “too heavy” to share with others, without “burdening them unnecessarily”).

To facilitate the implementation of this practice I took a few minutes at the beginning of each meetings to explain why I was interested in their story and why I believed it was of great value to the

church. As most participants had not had the opportunity to flesh out their story before, a semi-structured set of interview questions was designed to assist the participants to do so (see Appendix 4). Even when participants were comfortable telling their stories, the interview questions provided parameters for the researcher to refer back to when one or two of the participants requested assistance or got off topic. However, if participants seemed too willing to be directed by what they interpreted as the intent of each question rather than where their narrative was taking them, the questionnaire was put aside. This allowed the practice of telling their story to become more conversational and interactive in nature.

One participant struggled to tell her story and it was only after I offered some of my own narrative to her that she was able to begin. My willingness to be vulnerable seemed to provide her with a sense of assurance necessary for her to risk disclosing her own story to me.

The remaining two women were at ease sharing their story and only required the researcher to ask questions for the sake of clarity or to avoid ambiguity. These additional questions tended to probe participants to consider: “what did you mean/understand by that?” or “could you tell me more about that?” or “how do you think this impacted you?” Because the practice of storytelling was the primary means of establishing the baseline data for the project, I believed it was necessary to be clear about the participant’s intentions in sharing/not sharing specific details, so as not to infer or interpret their experiences for them.

As stated in the rationale for choosing this practice, one of the aspects of storytelling I hoped would minister to the participants was the way in which the invitation and actual telling of their stories might to remind them of both their personal value, as well as the value of their stories, to God.<sup>101</sup> This was, in fact, exactly what transpired with each woman as she narrated the story of her affliction. Even for the participant who found the practice of storytelling exceedingly difficult, who throughout the initial meeting insisted, “no one would be interested in my story” found herself overcome with emotion when she was repeatedly assured, “your story matters because *you* matter!”

The interview with this particular participant proved to be the most challenging, yet the most moving of the three. This participant had clearly buried both her story and the pain her interpretation of the story had been causing her for a very long time. Yet part of the truly beautiful aspect afforded by this practice was the realignment God began to bring into her story as she recounted it to me.

For nearly twenty years this woman had harbored the belief her first spouse’s sudden death had been a punitive action taken by God against her. The horrific guilt and anguish she had been suffering all of these years, like a festering wound, was lanced all because she was invited to share the story of her affliction.

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<sup>101</sup> See Chapter 5 ‘Theological Reflections’ for a fuller discussion of the role of the Doctrine of Creation in understanding the value of contextualizing our story with God’s grand meta-narrative, particularly amidst suffering.

The invitation to narrate their stories similarly afforded the other two participants a sense of release. Though there was much less emotional intensity involved in these meetings, still tears also flowed for these two participants as they told their stories. Both of these women expressed how powerful it was to be given ‘permission’ to talk freely about their experiences. This idea of ‘permission’ meant different things to both women. To one it meant being given the space, and time, to remember elements of her story not typically of interest to anyone but herself. For another participant, this practice provided her with a reason to reflect, review, and examine where God had been in the midst of all she had endured, and how these experiences continued to influence and impact her ability/disability to relate to God, herself, and others in the past and in the present.

A clinical psychologist, with thirty years of practice, told me each time a patient has the opportunity to tell their story an increased understanding and insight into the significance of their story is gained.<sup>102</sup> She believed telling their stories was like doing a jigsaw puzzle. Each time it was told a ‘new’ piece dropped into place and helped a fuller picture emerge. For participants telling the stories of their suffering allowed them a chance to see the whole of their story rather than fragmented, isolated anecdotes.<sup>103</sup> Concrete ways in which God had

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<sup>102</sup> In conversation with Hanita Dagan, C. Psych., Calgary, Alberta, Canada, Dec. 2012.

<sup>103</sup> The puzzle metaphor is poignant in many ways, as it is also descriptive of the fragmented postmodern self where integrating suffering into our lives poses a tremendous struggle. For a

been present and faithfully providing for them grew increasingly evident, even in the midst of their continued questioning and confusion.

With each of the three interviews there was a period of initial awkwardness getting started in the practice. Eventually a visible shift occurred for all three participants, though at differing time frames for each. This shift seemed to correlate with the moment each participant began to be moved by their own recollection of God's presence and agency in their lives.

Though participants had been asked to be available for 1.5 hours to facilitate sufficient, yet unrushed time to tell their stories, not one participant wanted to end the practice at the allotted time. In all three cases the researcher had to draw the practice to a close after approximately three hours.

The second practice of storytelling took place after the six weeks of practicing the *Examen*. All of these meetings were conducted within one week of our final group meeting. This time round I asked participants where they wanted to meet. Two requested we meet in their own homes and one wanted to meet in large, busy coffee shop. These meetings were somewhat shorter than the initial ones, as I suspect participants knew what to expect this time around and had given some forethought to what they wanted to communicate.

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more comprehensive understanding of this struggle see Jonathan R. Wilson's *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*.

## **b) *The Examen***

I chose to do this practice in a group context for several reasons. First, I anticipated some anxiety amongst the participants because of their lack of familiarity with this practice coupled with the vulnerability they might feel in engaging in this type of prayer with others present.

Secondly, these women all came from traditions which had implicitly taught them to think of prayer as a means of communicating their needs to God. The idea God would respond to them was not something any of these women believed an appropriate expectation to have of God. The nature of the *Examen*, however, requires practitioners to become aware of their helplessness and need to be led by God and directed by God's leading. I knew this might feel awkward and cause some degree of anxiety, but just as everything else in our lives is a gift of God's grace and not the fruit of our effort, I wanted each of these women to experience the reality that God wanted to give more to them than they were expecting.

The *Examen* is also a prayer practice intended to provide us with a way of being regularly available to God, to God's love and light that God might begin to heal the darkness in us by drawing us more deeply to God's self. Though it may sound counter intuitive, my experience led me to believe encountering God's love without fear is not always easy. Prolonged affliction, in particular, often leaves people in defensive postures limiting their capacity to trust or to hope, let alone to receive

good things without suspicion. I wanted to provide a trusting accompaniment for the women to help ease some of these potential obstacles.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, I hoped to provide participants with the opportunity to be mutually encouraged and supported by one another. I believed the group environment would be conducive to participants learning together and from one another. Similarly, I hoped as they listened to one another's struggles and questions about the practice discouragement would be minimized. Learning a new skill is never easy, especially when it appears to be so 'simple'.

Alongside my own stumbling and struggling in my private practice of the *Examen*, Timothy Gallagher describes Ignatius likewise wrestling with distractions and doubting God's voice, alongside a general awareness of his own impatience with both God and himself.<sup>105</sup> For these reasons, I wanted to provide the participants with as much support and encouragement as possible.<sup>106</sup> This was a bit of a risk because the women were more or less strangers to one another, having only met as participants in one of my previous research projects. But the risk paid off, as each week the conversations became less awkward and more intimate. Participants also began to pray for one another outside of our time

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-50.

<sup>106</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 2006), 42-53.

together and follow up with each other about prayer requests made the previous week.

As this style of listening and responding prayer was new to the participants I also tried to ensure our time together would not be interrupted in anyway. To limit distractions participants were asked to turn off cell phones; a note was posted on my front and back doors stating I would be unavailable from 7-8:30pm; and members of my household were also instructed not to disturb us. To establish a mood conducive to prayer there was soft lighting and sofas and arm chairs were available so participants could get as physically comfortable as possible. The sofas and chairs were also pulled into a circle formation to create a sense of being in an enclosed and private environment. I also encouraged the participants to make a cup of tea for themselves when they first arrived, as this provided a time for participants to greet one another and chat a little bit before settling in to begin our practice.

Once everyone was settled I then commenced leading the participants through Yancey's adapted version of the *Examen* by reading the six steps slowly.<sup>107</sup> Though the practice was being done together the women were asked to pray as my readings were directing them and then to respond to the Spirit privately, in silence. Consequently, I needed to be attentive to the time I spent reading each step as I wanted to ensure the women had ample time to pray and respond to the directions, but I did

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<sup>107</sup> See Appendix 2 for a description of each step.

not want to force the silence.<sup>108</sup> I also added and/or subtracted to Yancey's text with words of further instruction, encouragement, or caution as I felt led. Working through the whole practice never took more than 15-20 minutes.

It is important to note that though I read the questions of the prayer to the group each week, I did not solicit feedback from the participants about the specifics of their encounters with God. Rather, at the end of our practice the women were asked to share what the experience of the practice was like for them. The intention here was to ensure participants were apprehending and being attentive to the experience, while preventing them from being overly concerned about what the Spirit was/was not revealing to them individually.

In light of participants' lack of familiarity with the *Examen* I took 5-10 minutes at the beginning of our time together each week to briefly share aspects of its history or ways the *Examen* could be adapted for use throughout the day. For the sake of simplicity, I used the version of the *Examen* originally forwarded to the participants with their letter of invitation to participate in the project.<sup>109</sup> But I wanted participants to know there were many ways of adapting the *Examen* and why Ignatius chose to use this practice as he did, as a means to encourage them. I often used participants' comments on the experience of the practice from the

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<sup>108</sup> I am aware of the discomfort most of us feel in the midst of silence and our need to learn to grow more comfortable with it, perhaps most especially in prayer. But for the purposes of this project, and to respect the time frame I had asked of the participants, I attempted to be aware of the Spirit's direction and of the clock.

<sup>109</sup> Yancey, *Out of the House of Bread*, 44-46.

previous weeks to determine what introductory material might be helpful to provide the following week. This led to providing participants with some background on discernment, a brief survey of other types of prayer practices, and finally a discussion on the common fear each participant had expressed with this prayer practice. This struggle pertained to the Lord's desire to reveal the mysteries of our hearts to us. The participants were so afraid of having their worst assumptions of God's disappointment with them confirmed. It was heartbreaking to hear, yet extraordinary for such a profound wound to surface in the context of this project. I addressed this fear the following week by reading scripture that spoke the truth to these women about how God truly felt about them. This brief 'teaching' time also provided some transition time between everyone arriving at my house, getting a cup of tea, and settling in to commencing our practice.

These six meetings were well attended. Two participants each missed one week because of out of town family commitments.

## **VII. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis:**

The methods employed to collect data for this project involved semi-structured interviews conducted with participants, both pre-and post the six weeks of group gatherings. The first of these interviews established the baseline data for the project. This data provided a

preliminary window into how the participants understood the meaning and significance of their suffering and the role it has played in their life of faith. It also provided an initial sense of where participants have seen or not seen God's presence and God's involvement with them in their suffering. The final opportunity for participants to share their story was intended to determine whether or not the practices of storytelling and the *Examen* elicited a re-narrating of their stories.

The researcher's *field notes*, taken during these pre-and post interviews, as well as after each of the six weekly gatherings were extensive and later coded with particular attention paid to the three-dimensional spaces of Narrative Inquiry: personal/social (interactions); past/present/future (continuity); and place (situation).<sup>110</sup> Careful attention was paid in these field notes to the existential conditions and physical environment of each phase of the project. The intent of gathering such extensive data from the field of inquiry was to try and both capture the fullest sense of what meaning or sense was being given to the experiences participants were sharing, while resisting the temptation to edit or neglect data that may initially appear irrelevant or ambiguous.<sup>111</sup>

The individual meetings were also *tape recorded and transcribed* and the transcriptions were coded in the same manner as the researcher's notes. Over 500 pages of data was collected between the researcher's

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<sup>110</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 50.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

field notes and those produced from the transcriptions of all six interviews.

The participants were also asked to keep a *journal* in which they were to reflect on their experience of both the practice of storytelling as well as the *Examen*. Unfortunately, only one of the participants regularly recorded her experiences and reflections. The other two participants only managed to fill 2-3 pages of their respective journals. Consequently, as all three participants had been involved in my earlier Praxis research, which had also pertained to experiences of suffering, I used all three of their *journals from the Praxis* to inform the present research.<sup>112</sup> In reviewing these journals all were recorded in light of the different methodology implemented for this project. Referencing of common themes, slippages, silences, and patterns pertinent to the present work was also noted.

Finally, in keeping with the methodology of Narrative Inquiry the researcher kept a *journal* of her experience of all aspects of the project. In the context of this journal the researcher was attentive to her own responses and reactions to all aspects of the project and the participants.<sup>113</sup> Journal entries were also made about the ways in which the researcher perceived her presence and/or her experiences altered or impacted participants during all phases of the project. The intent of this

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<sup>112</sup> See E. Ann Thakkar, unpublished, "A Resource for Hope Amidst Suffering" (Vancouver, BC: Carey Theological College, 2015).

<sup>113</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 50.

journal was to provide the researcher with a means of both reflecting on her experience of the project, as well as encouraging a mindfulness around issues of reflexivity and reciprocity.<sup>114</sup>

This journal was particularly helpful to note the tensions created for the researcher because of the nature of the project and the intimacies generated between her and the participants. As Clandinin and Connelly observe, "...when narrative inquirers are in the field, they are never disembodied recorders of someone else's experiences. They too are having an experience...(therefore) the researcher's experience is always a dual one, always the inquirer experiencing the experience and also being a part of the experience itself".<sup>115</sup> So, the researcher needed to be constantly attentive to this reality, which required a disciplined willingness to be honest to the responses and reactions she was having in the midst of both the practices of both storytelling and the *Examen*. I like the way Sensing puts it,

"The role of ...the researcher, as the primary qualitative research tool necessitates the identification of...biases, values, emotions, and agendas. Additionally, as a co-participant in the project requires you to view the context and the people not as objects to be studied, but as people deserving of respect, dignity, and reciprocity."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock Publishing, 2011), 224.

<sup>115</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 81.

<sup>116</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock Publishing, 2011), 41-42.

## **VIII. Project Limitations:**

### ***a) Due to the Nature:***

The subject matter at the heart of this project contends with the many mysteries which surround suffering. This means there will always be the possibility of disappointing participants who hope to find answers to questions which may remain unanswerable this side of heaven. For this reason, it is imperative to clearly articulate and communicate the project's perimeters and intentions with each participant.

Similarly, due to the nature of the project I believe an interview with potential participants is warranted prior to their invitation to participate in the research. I think this is especially important if the researcher is not adequately familiar with the potential participant and their story. This caution is offered for the sake of both the researcher and the participant because of the vulnerability required for participation in the practice of storytelling in particular.

Finally, the researcher should have a fairly high degree of comfort working with emotionally vulnerable and potentially fragile people. There were several times, during both practices, when participants were overcome by the pain they had suffered or were continuing to endure. I suspect if these reactions/responses had surprised, frightened, or alarmed me the potential to cause participants further suffering was a very real possibility.

***b) Due to the Procedure:***

A project of this nature would be better suited (and no doubt its data much richer) if it were conducted over a longer period of time. I believe the continuity and longevity of relationships better serves the purposes of a project of this nature by permitting trust to build between people. I believe trust is a critical requirement for people who have borne the imposed silence and isolation suffering can so often inflict on people. I also think a longer timeframe would facilitate opportunities for further pieces of people's narratives to emerge and familiarity with the practice of the *Examen* to occur. Both would only serve to enrich participants' experiences, as well as the data collection.

It would have been helpful for the value of the data analysis if participants had consistently written journal entries as requested. But, journaling was in itself a new practice to 2/3 participants. Consequently, it would benefit future researchers to clearly articulate the purpose and value of these participant journals, along with examples of typical journal entries.

There is weakness inherent to every methodological approach to research and Narrative Inquiry (NI) is no exception. NI depends heavily on the researcher's ability to draw stories out of participants, stories which can be painful and therefore difficult for participants to both remember and to share.

Stories also have the tendency to be ambiguous and open to interpretation, so the subjectivity of the researcher will have a particular influence on both the approach to the work, as well as its findings. The nature of this subjective reality requires the researcher to be both attentive to how their own experiences might prejudice the work and a willingness to work with data that is resistant to certainty.<sup>117</sup>

The nature of the data produced in NI also presents a unique challenge. Stories are not easily synthesized. This can contribute to the temptation to manipulate them for the sake of ease or an agenda - either way putting their integrity and value of the data at risk.

Finally, this methodology generates a considerable amount of data. This potentially might make it unsuitable for large numbers of participants, in light of considerable amount of time involved in coding, correlating, and analyzing the findings.

***c) Due to Applicability:***

This project benefited from the shared understanding of the participants, particularly regarding the legitimacy of stories and prayer to their life of faith. It was also critical the researcher believed these stories of suffering were of inherent value to God because God inherently valued those suffering.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 2000), 37.

<sup>118</sup> This is not to infer a lack of knowledge on the part of the participants would negate the value of this project, or that it is not the Holy Spirit who ultimately brings life and light to

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Data Collection and Analysis

This project sought to answer the question: “*In what ways might eight weeks of practicing storytelling and the Examen provide suffering believers the opportunity to encounter the incarnational presence of God, thereby provide them with resources to meet the challenges of their suffering?*” The research methodology I chose to accomplish this task was Narrative Inquiry (NI). In this chapter I will commence by stipulating the rationale for my choice of this particular methodology and then proceed with an analysis of the data it provided.

#### **I. Rationale for Research Methodology:**

“The language of logical argument, of proofs, is the language of the limited self we know and can manipulate. But the language of parable and poetry, of storytelling, moves from the imprisoned language of the provable into the freed language of what I must, for the lack of another word, continue to call faith.” – Madeleine L’Engle <sup>119</sup>

Connelly and Clandinin believe human beings are inherently storytelling organisms who lead storied lives, both individually and socially, therefore a methodology which allows stories to be the primary vehicle through which researchers seek to better understand how human

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believers. Rather, it is a factor the researcher should consider if running this project with participants who are newer believers.

<sup>119</sup> Madeleine L’Engle, *A Circle of Quiet*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1972) as quoted in Nish Weiseth’s *Speak: How Your Story Can Change the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 17.

beings are experiencing the world is a powerful tool.<sup>120</sup> Narrative Inquiry (NI) is such a tool. It weds both the phenomenon (story) and the method (narrative).<sup>121</sup> The intent of this methodology is to describe these storied lives by collecting and telling them as narratives of experience for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the *teller's* sense of their meaning and significance. Quoting Clifford Geertz, Clandinin and Connelly suggest,

“narratives are hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced-together patterning after the fact...particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there...woven together with a variety of facts and...interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go”.<sup>122</sup>

The underlying assumption is there is value in such unquantifiable knowledge, which includes our experiences. NI accepts the idea that knowledge can be held in stories that can be relayed, stored, and retrieved. NI sees knowledge as embodied and embedded in both our individual and social stories, a perspective I believe to be reflective of a biblical epistemology.

This qualitative research paradigm is focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of the participants involved.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 19, No. 5, 2.

<sup>121</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 4.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>123</sup> Gina Wong-Wylie, 2006. “Narratives of Developing Counsellors’ Preferred Theories of Counselling Storied Through Text, Metaphor, and Photographic Images,” *The Qualitative Report* 11, no. 2, 262-301. <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR11-2/wongwylie.pdf>

But NI also acknowledges the centrality of the researcher's experiences and how these experiences inherently become embedded within the research experience. This means engaging in NI involves an ongoing reflective process for both participants and the researcher because there is an awareness that in the act of telling our stories from the past a present interpretative and re-interpretative dynamic is occurring. This methodology is then an approach to research which sees value in both the stories being told and the process through which they are being communicated. The data collected in NI is primarily concerned with the meaning and significance such stories have for the participants. For this reason, I believe NI is uniquely suited to the purposes of this project.

## **II. Data Collection:**

The data has been arranged into five sections. Part I reflects the first storytelling practice of each participant, before the practice of the *Examen* began. This data is then followed by a recounting of the experiences of the *Examen* in Part II, followed by the second practice of storytelling in Part III. Part IV will summarize the project's findings. Finally, Part V, will conclude the chapter with a discussion of the assumptions and biases of the researcher and their potential impact on the project.

For the sake of maintaining the integrity of the participant's stories, and in keeping with the construct of Narrative Inquiry, I have chosen not to frame the stories through subdividing them into data categories, but rather to present the stories as they were offered to me. Sensing's cautionary words have directed me in the manner in which I have sought to relate these stories. He cautions, "...by imposing a particular way of seeing the data, categorizing the themes, you are framing the data in a particular way...(and) a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing..."<sup>124</sup> By choosing not to categorize the data in this manner Sensing suggests we are resisting the danger of imposing a powerful conceptual and interpretative grid on the data, which becomes difficult to escape.<sup>125</sup>

In resisting this form of data presentation my hope is to likewise resist reducing the complex social dynamics and interactions that occurred for the participants within their stories. I think in doing so the narratives stand a better chance of revealing how it is participants made meaning and significance out of their experiences. I have, however, made comments throughout these narratives where I observed areas of convergence, divergence, silences and gaps between the participants' stories.<sup>126</sup>

Finally, Narrative Inquiry also demands that the researcher's own experience of the work be figured into the data, acknowledging the ways

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<sup>124</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock Publishing, 2011), 202.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 197, 200-201.

in which the inquirer's participation not only impacts the execution of the research, but impacts their own narrative reflections as well.

*(Note: All participants' words are italicised and where other characters appear in their stories I have avoided using their proper names.)*

**a) *The Initial Practice of Storytelling:***

**Jane's Story**

When I called to arrange a time for Jane's first practice of storytelling I sensed a significant tension between her desire to participate in this practice and her fear of what it might bring to the surface.

I too was feeling nervous about facilitating this practice of storytelling. I know for all of the participants telling the story of their suffering has the potential to provide them with healing or to cause them more pain. In this respect, I also feared my response to these stories might tip the scale for the women in one direction or the other. A deeply embedded belief I held only exacerbated my concerns. For as long as I can remember I had assumed if 'bad' things happened they were my fault, but if 'good' things happened they were to someone else's credit. In addition to this problem, despite being able to provide theological reasoning to the contrary, I had historically tended to operate as though God's only role in my life was to grade my performances. So, preparation for these interviews, especially with Jane, required me to acknowledge

God's agency in this work and God's sovereign care for these women, and for me.

Jane has always displayed a somewhat angry disposition. We have known each other for many years and I suspect this posture, coupled with her tendency to be easily provoked to argument (especially with those who hold contrary political values), has resulted in Jane experiencing a profound social isolation and loneliness.

*“People don't like me much – I'm always pushing and challenging their apathy or lack of urgency about the significance of things, especially in the church. People just think I'm a nuisance. But somebody has to care about this stuff!”*

Despite her anger there is a significant generosity and compassion in Jane, as evidenced in the years she has faithfully poured herself (and her own money) into serving generations of Sunday School students in her local church. The affection she feels for these students is clearly visible in her interactions with them, as well as in her demeanour while she describes her work among these children to me.

Jane also has a relentless sympathy for the underdog and a willingness to advocate for them regardless of the cost to herself.

*“Life can be really tough. The cool kids can make it even tougher on the not-so-cool ones. Who do they have to stand up for them? So, I want to make sure I do whenever I have the chance. I hate seeing these little have-it-all's get away with stuff all the time. So, what if some parents or teachers or church leaders don't like it. What do I care if one more person dislikes me? At least the poor kids won't feel alone!”*

I knew the value of this practice of faith would largely depend upon Jane's determination that the risk of sharing her story with me was worth the potential rewards. In fact, Jane later confessed to me: "*I am nervous about these practices. What if nothing happens? I'm not exactly God's favourite person you know!*"

When Jane arrived, I invited her into my office and immediately watched her curl up into a chair, tucking up her legs and wrapping her arms around them tightly. She pressed herself into the corner of the chair in such a way as if to limit her exposure to a potential physical attack. Her jaw clenched and she looked over at me through squinting, suspicious eyes. Her body language was an odd mixture of formidable combatant and frightened child. Not surprising, it was very difficult to help Jane begin her story.

*Jane: "Remind me of what the point of all of this is again. Life happens and you just have to deal with it. Who would ever be interested in my story anyway? It's boring and repetitive."*

Ann: "I believe your story and the story of your suffering is significant. It is significant because God has uniquely, lovingly created you, and so through you he has chosen to uniquely reveal himself to the world. This is also means that how he has met you in your suffering is also unique, because both you and the way you have suffered is unique. So, your life, your suffering matters, because you matter! You matter a lot!"

Jane's eyes welled up with tears and instantly her demeanour changed. The combatant disappeared and the frightened, by now hopeful, child remained. I was shocked by the speed at which this physical transformation took place. I paused because I was not sure how to begin.

*“I screwed up Ann. I should have known better! I should have known better! God took him to punish me.”* Because of Jane’s participation in prior research projects with me, I immediately realized she was referring to the death of her first husband. She began to sob. Vulnerable displays of emotions were not typical of Jane. I was moved by her anguish, but confused by her words. I asked how she believed his death could possibly be her fault. Through her tears, she explained she had been raised to believe it was not appropriate to move in with her boyfriend, but she decided to do it anyway. When she and her boyfriend married a few months later she did not invite her family to the wedding, and within a year her new husband was dead. *“God is done with me. I got what I deserved. Every choice has its consequences, so I have to live with what I’ve done. But I’ll be damned if my kids, or any other kids I care about, ever make such a stupid decision.”*

I was stunned. All these years Jane had believed the death of her first husband was God’s punishment for dishonouring her parents. This explained a tremendous amount about Jane’s prickly nature and her relentless support for the underdog. It also accounts for why she had so faithfully poured herself into teaching Sunday School all these years. She had been trying to educate children in hopes they might be spared the consequences of poor choices, consequences such as those she had been living with for all these years. It also explained the way she seems to characterize God as being vengeful and uncompromisingly judicious.

I began to cry. I was overwhelmed by the love and compassion of God for my friend, and for the horrifically malformed narrative she had been trapped in all these years. I knelt by her chair and wrapped her sobbing body in my arms. “You are so wrong Jane. So very, very wrong. How deeply the Father has longed for you to know the truth of his heart towards you. Let me assure you he has never been done with you! He will never be done with you!”

Jane has carried this distorted perception of God’s role in her narrative for over thirty years, somehow believing it was the only way to make sense of her suffering. The agony of Jane perceiving God in this way seemed so egregious to me I almost missed its resemblance to the image of God I, too, have carried in my own suffering narratives.

I asked Jane if she had ever told anyone else she held herself responsible for her first husband’s death.

*J: “When he died my parents said to me, ‘we told you so’. I deserved that because they had every right to disown me for what I had done.”*

*A: “What about Andy (her second husband)?”*

Jane shook her head. She could not seem to speak, but her eyes begged me to assure her God did not despise her, as she had been believing all these years. Then her anger flared up, and she burst out: “God can actually be a bit of...well, a prick. Can I say that? Her shoulders visibly slumped, and she continued, “I probably shouldn’t say

*that. I mean we get what we deserve, don't we? But sometimes I wonder if I will ever be able to appease him."*

I was overwhelmed by Jane's disclosure and by the trust she has extended to me in sharing this agonizing burden. All these years Jane has believed God was against her, which explains why she has then behaved as if the whole world was against her. Years of holding this belief has led Jane to erect a fortress wall around herself. These walls, intended to keep more pain out, have sadly trapped pain within. It will not be simple to breach these walls. What's more, having believed this interpretation of her story, she has condemned herself to bear the consequences entirely alone.

**Betty's Story:**

Betty appears to be a quiet, self-effacing woman, with little to say. It is only when her narrative touches on the pain she has endured because of the pressure she has felt to be perfect her whole life, that it becomes clear there is far more to Betty than meets the eye.

*"When I was seven years old I was told, I had to accept Jesus. I had no idea what that meant, only that it was expected of me. I then spent the next seven years of my life falling away, rededicating my life to God, falling away and rededicating my life to God. I finally gave up in junior high. I think a part of me has always believed God would only ever be happy with me if I was perfect...and if I made him look good. But I could never manage either."*

Growing up, Betty's family were active participants in their local church. Both of her parents were exceptionally talented singers and

pianists, who regularly performed in and out of the church community. Consequently, Betty and her older sibling were “*pushed*” to play piano and to perform, and were expected to do so “*perfectly*”. On top of musical excellence Betty also felt pressure to compensate for her older sibling’s poor academic performance and tirelessly worked at being a “*perfect*” student.

In junior high, something snapped in Betty. It was at this point she began what she referred to as her ‘rebellion’, in which she publically behaved like a ‘perfect’ Christian kid, but in private she had started drinking and had become sexually active. But as long as Betty kept up her public persona, no one seemed to care what she did in private, until she was caught drunk in high school and suspended. At this point her father expressed his disgust with her, as he happened to be the music director of the high school.

*“My dad told me, ‘You’ve hit rock bottom Betty!’ And all I could think of was, ‘you ain’t seen nothin’ yet buddy!’ At this point I wanted to be anyone but me. I liked who I became when I drank. ‘Drunk Betty’ was fun, witty, outgoing, and people liked her.”*

Betty continued to engage in this behaviour throughout high school and university, which she believed caused her father to simply behave as though she no longer existed. Her mother asked her husband to give Betty a chance, to spend time with her, “...to which my dad responded, ‘why? I don’t even like her!’ This screwed up my understanding of God as a father so badly. I couldn’t help but believe he was a negative, judgemental, absent, authority figure.”

Betty's unwillingness to stop her 'rebel' behaviour, alongside her father's rejection was disabling her from believing it was possible for God to ever like her, let alone love her. Betty is convinced God merely tolerates her, "because he has to". The depth of her conviction about this makes me think of Jane.

*"If I'm honest, I'm not really sure God knows me. Well, I know he does 'technically'. But somehow, I think, even now, as long as I do the 'right' thing publically, no one really cares what I do privately, not even God. It just seems to me that as long as I lay low and don't publically embarrass him, God is content to leave me alone. Maybe this would be different if I was more 'impressive?'"*

When Betty was first married, her mom was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. Betty's mother was the one parent Betty felt close to. The diagnosis was devastating to Betty, but became a crossroad in her life of faith. She once again began to regularly attend church. The diagnosis also led Betty and her new husband to begin thinking about the kind of parents they wanted to be and the kind of family they hoped to create. Sadly, within a year Betty's mother passed away.

*"You know I didn't really want to tell you my story Ann, because the suffering I have endured, or at least 99% of it, I have brought on myself. I feel a lot of shame and a lot of unworthiness before God. But I'm also a little pissed off with him too."*

After the death of her mother Betty worked really hard to do all the 'right' things. She tried to make sure her young growing family attended church, got involved in activities which would reinforce

Christian values, and eventually homeschooled all three of their children. But anxiety perpetually lurked at the edges of her heart. There was a constant, nagging sense that despite everything she was trying to do, she was still a “*disappointment*” to God. She was still unable to pull off what she had convinced herself God required of her – perfection.

Themes of guilt, fear, and anger surfaced, dominating Betty’s narrative, just as they dominated Jane’s. But unlike Jane, Betty expressed strong feelings of guilt and fear when she began to see parallel emotions (primarily of anxiety) showing up in her children. Betty could see these emotions inhibiting her children’s willingness to make friends, try new activities, and sometimes even to leave the house.

*“It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t screwed up so badly, if I would have done what my parents wanted all of the time and not gone so far off the rails, my kids would be fine. But now I feel sick with guilt watching them. They are so socially and emotionally messed because of me...”*

The idea her children’s well-being (or lack of it) is entirely up to Betty, if she could just ‘get it right’ she could somehow protect them from becoming ‘like her’, reminds me of the same driving motivations fueling Jane. I also hear the words that have haunted my own narrative for years, *“I pray we don’t have girls, because if we do they are likely to end up just like you.”* I, too, believed the good in my children was the result of the influence of others and less desirable attributes or behaviours were my fault.

The weight of perpetually bearing the consequences of our past, coupled with the added fear and responsibility of ensuring our children never replicate our mistakes, is staggering. With this responsibility comes the assumption our sin forever defines who we ‘really’ are. This leaves us not only incapable of believing God could love us, but that we have deceived everyone who does.

Betty says she realized she has been perceiving God, “*as an adjudicator who has never been, nor will ever be, satisfied with my performance*”.

**Lauren’s Story:**

Lauren’s family was in a terrible car accident when she was only six years old. The driver of the car and Lauren’s oldest brother were killed instantly. Lauren was severely injured and her only other sibling suffered brain damage. As Lauren’s father had endured a traumatic upbringing, losing his mother as a young child and then being abandoned by his father and raised in foster care, the trauma of the accident, coupled with the loss of his son resulted in a deepening of his emotional disengagement with the family. Lauren’s mother became “*like a single parent*” in her home. Things were very difficult emotionally for the family in her younger years, leaving Lauren with no memories of the first six years of her life. “*I don’t even remember my older brother. How awful is that?*”

When Lauren was twelve years of age, her mother decided to go back to church. Until this point neither parent were people of faith, so church life was not part of Lauren's earliest experiences. Within a short period of time Lauren's mother made a profession of faith, followed by Lauren, her father, and her remaining sibling. *"This made a huge difference in our family. It helped us a lot."*

As a result of faith's new importance in their lives, church became a central focus for the family and led Lauren to pursue a career on the mission field after university. This is when she met Ron, her soon-to-be husband. *"Ron and his family were incredible. The family have been Christians for at least three generations. They are such good people. Not like mine. My family is, well, full of black sheep."*

Both Ron and Lauren were in their late 30's when they married, so they decided to adopt older children rather than trying to have children on their own. They chose to adopt a brother and sister from a local native Indian reserve, who were eleven and nine years of age, respectively. This was a challenging decision in light of the children's background, but one both Ron and Lauren felt God calling them to pursue.

*"It was a very tough go with the kids right from the start. They had been abandoned by their mom at an early age, but raised in a pretty good foster home. Yet when their mom made arrangements to see them she would just never show up. We tried so hard to make up for all of the love they did not receive, but it was...well it was just always brutal."*

Six years after adopting the children Ron suddenly passed away and Lauren was faced with the *"terrifying prospect"* of having to single

parent their challenging children. What made it even more frightening for Lauren was that by this point both children had begun to engage in increasingly dangerous behaviours such as excessive consumption of drugs and alcohol and disappearing for days on end without a word to Lauren. Despite numerous interventions, initiated by Lauren and Family Services, Lauren feared their oldest had been both prostituting himself and selling drugs to maintain his addictions. *“But Ron’s death seemed to snap (their son) out of it. Quite miraculously he suddenly became desperate to clean up his life. I still can’t quite believe it.”* Though he did appear to be sincere in his desire to get his life back, the boy continued to fight the lure of the life he had been involved in for so long.

Consequently, Lauren’s life continued to be one crisis after another.

*“Ron’s death rocked both kids. I think they felt as though everyone who was supposed to love them just abandoned them. I think Ron’s death was a form of abandonment for both of them...and one they just couldn’t face. (Our son) tried to come to terms with this stuff, and he has continued to try ever since. But it’s like there is a default setting in him that keeps being flipped off whenever things get hard.”*

Within months of Ron’s death their daughter disappeared for a week. She was fifteen years old. Lauren was sick with worry as this was the longest period in which the child had ever been absent.

*“I think this was the point I realized I was not going to be able to live like this anymore, especially without Ron. He was always the gentle one, the one able to give the kids grace, so much grace! But I knew I couldn’t, and wouldn’t, be able to keep living like this. I just didn’t know how to put an end to it.”*

*“Surprisingly,” she adds, “I had no anger with God about Ron’s death. But I was extremely angry with him about the kids. I have no hope for them anymore.”*

To make sense of God’s seeming lack of intervention in the lives of her children Lauren determined her suffering was God’s choice for her, for the purpose of maturing her and, *“somehow bringing glory to God”*. She adds, *“God uses suffering as a part of his plan for our lives. I think suffering is even necessary for us to become mature in our faith. Yes, our suffering is purposeful and necessary.”*

When asked about whether or not she believed this view of suffering implicated God in the choices her children had made and the suffering they are enduring, Lauren became thoughtful for quite a lengthy period of time. She then grew teary.

*“No...no! I cannot believe what they are doing has been arranged by God ‘for their good’. No...no that doesn’t make sense or seem right to me at all. But where is he then? Why hasn’t he intervened? Is it me? Have I still not learned whatever lessons I needed to learn? I just don’t get it. I don’t get any of it.”*

This part of her story seemed to cause Lauren to reflect on memories of her childhood, and she wondered aloud:

*“I was not a good girl, though people thought I was. We didn’t have much money. My dad struggled with keeping a job and our bills paid. We didn’t ever really have much money... I stole things all the time. I told lies and I was very deceptive. It makes me feel like a fraud before God, actually. It’s really haunting me now. Have I lied my way into heaven? Have I just snuck in?”*

Lauren's reflections about being a fraud disconcerted me. I have struggled with this same fear, believing somehow, I too have perpetually duped people into thinking I am smarter, kinder, or more competent than I really am. This has me thinking about other parallels in our early years. My father, though a very successful school principal, was emotionally and physically absent. He too was abandoned as a boy and raised in foster care. I also remember lying as a child and being constantly aware of the scarcity of money available in our home. I wonder what links exist between these facets of our experiences and their effect on our relationship with God.

Lauren continued to be teary while she reflected on her relationship with God and how God has been present with her throughout Ron's death and amidst navigating life as a single parent.

*"It's strange because despite everything, despite how painful it's been to lose Ron, I have had such a deep peace and I really have felt such so much grace and I have been blessed by incredible amounts of love and care from so many people since Ron's death. I even feel closer to God now because I am having to single parent such difficult kids. How can I feel haunted and close to God at the same time?"*

**b) *The Examen:***

After the initial practice of storytelling concluded the participants met together each Monday evening for six-weeks in my home where I led them through the practice of the *Examen*. To provide data reflective of the way this experience unfolded I have recorded

participant/researcher comments or observations indicative of what transpired. As stated early, I did not elicit information about what participants were hearing from God during our practice, only what the experience of the practice was like for them.

A time of transition is necessary to commence the practice. It is a time where we shift from whatever we have been doing, to this time intentionally set apart to attend to God's voice. The *transition* time begins by asking participants to relax, to physically and spiritually settle in and become aware of the love of God inviting them to this time. It is also a time in which we ask the Holy Spirit to guide our questions, evaluations, and our examination. Yancey encourages us to "spend a few moments praying for clarity and charity towards (ourselves) and others" throughout our practice.<sup>127</sup> Becoming settled or still was not easy for any of the participants. One participant expressed a nagging anxiety during this time, especially in weeks one and two, about having to "*surrender control*" to the Holy Spirit to lead her in prayer. She preferred, as she said, "*to be in the driver's seat*". Another spoke poignantly of being still or quiet as "*terrifying because it meant having to hear myself and I fear what might be going on inside me. That's why I like to keep busy. It keeps the pain and everything else at bay*". Another observation came in our final week together when a participant confessed how awkward it felt

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<sup>127</sup> Yancey, *Out of the House of Bread*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 44-46.

each week to ask for charity towards herself and “*every week I hoped you wouldn’t ask us to pray this*”.

I, too, feel anxious coming to our practice, and after a particularly difficult week I journal before the participants arrive:

“I am very anxious tonight. It has been such a difficult week for me emotionally. So how am I equipped to help gather all of the narratives of suffering each of our lives represent in this room? I feel inadequate. I feel like the blind leading the blind. Yet I know we all need to come to God for only he can sustain us. Only he can reveal to us what our human eyes cannot see, and enable us to hear what our human ears cannot hear. So, I pray, ‘Come Holy Spirit. Come fill this place. Help me. Help us. Anchor us in these constant storms.’”

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius describes the prayer of the daily *Examen* as a series of five successive steps: gratitude, petition, review, forgiveness, and renewal.<sup>128</sup> *Step One*, gratitude, asks us to recall all of the gifts God’s love has made available to us throughout this day. Initially, this seemed to be the easiest step of the practice for all of the participants. None expressed difficulty in being able to recognize one or several ways in which God had gifted them throughout the day. Yet as the weeks progressed I sensed the Spirit asking me to remain in Step One for a slightly longer period of time asking more penetrating questions, such as “*ask the Spirit to show you situations and circumstances where you found yourself surprised by something God alone knew you wanted*” or “*ask God to reveal things that might have seemed insignificant at the*

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<sup>128</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, O. M. V., *The Examen Prayer* (New York, NY: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 2006), 53. In leading the practice I blended Gallagher’s outline of the *Examen* with Preston Yancey’s adopted version. (See Appendix Two for Yancey’s outline.)

time, but were intended to show you his affection for you". In my field notes I wrote,

*"God seems to want these women to know, more than anything else, that he loves them deeply, intimately, and faithfully. He wants me to give him the time necessary to remind them of all of the ways he has sought to reveal his love to them throughout the day. More than all else this seems to be the most important, most significant message he longs for them to grasp".*

Our prayer life is reflective of the image we hold of God in our hearts, so to begin our practice remembering God's gifts and the ways in which they reflect and reveal God's love for us was a rich way of entering into prayer. Ignatius writes the *Examen* begins with gratitude for God's concrete gifts throughout our day. It opens "a window into the deepest reality of our spiritual lives: God's unbounded love for us and desire for our response, in love, to the love revealed in this giving".<sup>129</sup>

Two participants commented the longer we reflected and waited on God's Spirit to reveal God's gifts of love the more nervous they became. One woman said, *"If I'm honest I was afraid nothing would come, that God wasn't interested in me, so I resented even thinking about it and wanted you to MOVE ON!"*

A second woman said, *"Isn't it enough to say we believe God loves us? Do we really need to make him 'prove it? Aren't we supposed to take it on faith? Is it actually ok to ask him to 'show us' tangible examples?"* But on the last week of our practice this participant commented, *"I can't believe it! I have actually started to anticipate God*

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<sup>129</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, O. M. V., *The Examen Prayer* (New York, NY: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 2006), 59.

*showing up, even in little ways. It's kind of cool! It helps me to believe he might really be at work behind the scenes..."*

*Step Two* is a step of petition, in which we seek the Holy Spirit's help in providing us with the insight, strength, and courage we will need to receive the gifts of God's grace that will make this time of prayer far more than is possible on our own accord. Gallagher encourages us to see this step as the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to provide us with deeper insights into God's 'concrete' workings in our lives and God's 'interior movement' within us which opposes God's work and therefore hinders our freedom in Christ and our ability to relate more closely with God.<sup>130</sup>

*Step Two* is not an easy step for the participants. Over the course of the six weeks of our practice the comments shifted from a sense of tentative hesitation, or fear, to repose. One woman wondered if God will "*show up*" and another asks, "*how are we supposed to know whether this is God's voice or just us making things up we want to hear?*"

There was also another type of fear present in the midst of the first few weeks of *step two*. The participants were acutely aware this step required a willingness to surrender their desires for God's desires as we progressed through the practice. One woman articulated her fear this way: "*I can't honestly say I trust God enough. So much has happened that I fear God will ask me to give up more or to do without less*". The remaining participants (and the researcher) nodded, completely understanding her resistance.

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

As we closed our final evening together I asked this articulate participant whether or not she felt she continued to feel afraid or resistant to God's will. She answered,

*"I think I assumed God was harsher, bossier, more like a bully really. But a bully who always got his way. But the person I have encountered is far gentler, kinder, and even, well, kind of funny! Do you think God might have a sense of humour?"*

Another woman wondered, *"Why was I so afraid of hearing God's voice? Now I find I am looking forward to hearing it. It is...comforting"*.

*Step Three* is a time to review the day, reflecting on what has been stirring in our hearts, initiated by God or otherwise, and our responses to these stirrings. It is also a general time of reflection of the day as a whole. This step asked practitioners to allow the Spirit to reveal where they have responded to God, or failed to do so. The idea of looking back through the day and noting its movements seemed to fascinate one woman in particular. She noted in her journal,

*"I now seem aware of how much my mood ebbs and flows throughout a 24-hr. period. I now notice how much the lows are associated with how I believe others are perceiving me. I never thought the approval of others was quite so important to me"*.

*"I never thought of the positive ways I respond to people or behave throughout a day as ways in which I was cooperating or working with God. That is a very cool revelation to me!"*

We all chuckled when another woman admitted she had a hard time remembering what she had done one hour prior to her arrival for our

time of prayer, let alone be able to review the whole day's rhythm. But she admitted how anticipating the practice had begun to cause her to be more attentive throughout the day, and that she was constantly surprised to find God showing up "*all over the place!*"

In my field notes I observed, "It is touching to see the uniqueness of the ways God relates to each of us. How things are said or done which touch us, yet would mean little to anyone else but us. It is beautiful."

In *Step Four* we ask God for forgiveness, for that which only God can bestow. This step, though a familiar principle to these Protestant Evangelical participants, catches them off-guard. It has to do with a quote by Jean Vanier in Gallagher's work, which I read to the participants each week, as an introduction to this step: "We can only truly accept others as they are, and forgive them, when we discover that we are truly accepted by God as we are and forgiven by him. It is a deep experience, knowing that we are loved and held by God in all our brokenness and littleness".

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*"I have always assumed God was angry with me, constantly disappointed, you know? It never dawned on me that God wanted to forgive me, that he wanted to remove anything that got between us. I never thought of the cross that way. It was always about guilt and punishment. But the connection between how I feel about being forgiven – like God is grudgingly obligated to do it, and how I feel about people I need to forgive is scary".*

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<sup>131</sup> Jean Vanier from *Community and Growth*, as quoted by Timothy M. Gallagher in *The Examen Prayer* (New York, NY: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 2006), 87.

Another participant admitted she could not forgive herself because she believed God could not forgive her. So, I read, “And while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him...let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (Luke 15:20, 23-24)

But it was during the fifth week of our practice that one participant noted in her journal:

*“I realized in the Forgiveness section of the Examen that I needed to forgive God! I needed to forgive him for not saving my marriage, for not healing (a close friend), and for not sparing (her child) from so much suffering. It was my deep disappointment with God that is fueling the perpetual anger I had towards myself and others. I had no idea...and I have no idea how to forgive God for not...being willing to intercede...”*<sup>132</sup>

Another woman confessed she was wrestling with the way family and friends had abandoned her in the midst of multiple episodes of suffering. *“Their cowardliness or indifference or just plain lack of concern cost me and my kids so much. I don’t even know how to honestly forgive them”*.

It was in the midst of this step participants and researcher alike found ourselves being confronted with the disparity between the image of God we thought we held, and the image of God we actually harboured in our hearts. *“I so understand Jonah. I feel towards so many exactly the*

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<sup>132</sup> See chapter 7 of Charles Ringma and Mary Dickau’s, *The Art of Healing Prayer: Bringing Christ’s Wholeness to Broken People*, (London, UK: SPCK, 2015) for a discussion concerning the significance of recognizing our need to forgive God before we can be free to receive God’s forgiveness.

*way he felt towards the Ninevites! I resent God's willingness to show mercy to those who have refused to show mercy to me..."*

In my journal I recorded this note,

*"The profound relational aspect of prayer seems most evident in the step of forgiveness. How much I find myself at odds with the mercy I so desperately need from God and the mercy I so easily withhold from others. There is something here, something about the humility required to receive forgiveness and the humility required to extend forgiveness that tells me God is so utterly unlike me...He is humble. God is humble! What a staggering, astonishing, vulnerable thing for him to be!"*

*Step Five* is a step of renewal where we are called to look back so that we might be enabled to look forward, into our tomorrows. We remember God's gifts of love to us. We remember God's willingness to reveal both God's presence and agency in our lives. We remember God's relentless, boundless offering of forgiveness. And as Holy Spirit reveals the ways in which we are working with God we begin to have hope and courage for our future. One participant expressed it this way,

*"I have been taken back by the disproportionate number of ways God keeps saying that he is pleased with me. Is that possible? But tonight I realize God has been trying to do for me what I do for my children – assure them it is who they are that we most celebrate and pay attention to, not who they are not. It is their uniqueness we treasure. Sure, they are not perfect. But we don't care. So why do I struggle so hard to believe God would view me any differently? I always tell my kids that only they can be them. No one else can be who they are. Ironic, isn't it?"*

Before concluding our final time together, I asked the women to share what had been the biggest surprise for them in the practice of the *Examen*. Here is what they shared:

- *“It wasn’t near as scary as I presumed. I really was pretty nervous. But now, I think I’m going to miss this”.*

- *“It’s become less awkward, more familiar, and has caused me to want to notice God’s presence in my day far more. I’ve even put a sticker on my computer “notice God”! I now actually see God wants me to notice what he’s doing for me; he wants to speak to me! It sounds crazy!”*

- *“I liked being led into prayer, which surprised me because I have always thought of prayer as so intimate, something only shared between God and I. So, I didn’t think I would be comfortable sharing this time with others. But what I discovered was a sense of communal vulnerability and need that somehow made me feel at ease. Plus, the Examen helped me to also see that I had really thought of prayer as a one-way street – I bring my requests to God. Period. This has opened my eyes to prayer’s reciprocal nature.”*

**c) *The Second Practice of Storytelling:***

After the practice of the *Examen* concluded I met with each participant for a second practice of storytelling.

**Jane’s Story:**

For the second practice of storytelling Jane and I decided to meet in a large public coffee shop. Jane was clearly nervous, but she

showed up. I began the practice by asking her the first few questions from the interview questionnaire.<sup>133</sup> Jane asked, “*what could possibly be worth me telling this story to you again? It doesn’t really matter to anyone.*” So once again I reminded Jane why her story mattered, why she mattered, and once again Jane came to tears. “*You keep making me cry.* (She smiled.) *I’m not really sure I believe you, you know?*”

Jane’s longing to be proved wrong about her interpretation of God’s attitude towards her was palpable. She told me: “*I didn’t really want to do the prayer practice. I was actually pretty nervous about it you know. I mean what if God spoke to everyone but me? That would be embarrassing, wouldn’t it?*” She continued:

*“I’m not sure what to think about any of this anymore. I’m not sure I even want to do this. I felt like this the first Monday night too. Man, that first night I was so uncomfortable because I am ok to bring my requests to God, but the idea of giving God an opportunity to respond made me pretty nervous. Sometimes I’ve wondered whether I was just agitated because you were reading so slow or because I was afraid if you didn’t hurry up God might say something I didn’t want to hear. But you know I actually began to look forward to Monday nights. Over time I found this kind of prayer less intimidating and actually quite peaceful. I felt comforted by it.”*

I realized how much courage and hope it had taken Jane to be willing to engage in these practices. But once again I was uncertain how to help her begin to tell her story, as I feared she might feel coerced or obligated. I shared my concern with her. This was her response:

*“So, I guess I can say that I’m now not so sure why my husband died. I still think God meant to teach me a lesson, that I shouldn’t have gone against my parents’ values or kept my*

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<sup>133</sup> See Appendix 4.

*marriage a secret. Their response was still pretty generous, if you ask me. But...well, now there's stuff I'm just not quite as sure of at the moment."*

*"All of this – telling you about my life and doing this prayer practice has made me realize how much I'm still suffering over (her first husband)'s death and how angry I am. I still think God must struggle to love me though, cause I sure do!"*

The slight brevity I sensed in her on this second telling made me hopeful that small cracks had been made in the fortress of protection she had built. I asked her if her understanding of her story is consistent with what she has taught her Sunday school students about God. I also asked if her understanding of God's view on her 'mistakes' coincided with what she taught her children about the gospel.

*"I try to make sure the kids understand that for every action there's a reaction. The Old Testament stories are very helpful to get them to see just how true this is."*

Jane skirted my actual question and instead began to talk about her frustrations with the way her church celebrated Good Friday and Easter, which involved providing colouring books and crayons for the children *"as if they weren't smart enough to understand the frickin' message and needed to be entertained!"*

At this point I tried to encourage Jane to start her story from a different direction. I asked her about her childhood and her family members. She told me,

*"I don't know. I never thought about it. My mom was pretty strict. She used to get pretty irritated with me. She said I just never stopped asking, 'Why? Why? Why?' and it drove her crazy."*

*Dad said I'd be the first female president or maybe the first female pastor in the CRC (Christian Reformed Church)!"*

*"Dad was the gentle one. If we got sick Mom ordered us to bed and to stay in bed, but Dad would sneak ginger ale to us when Mom wasn't looking. Mom made sure we towed the line."*

*"I had some friends, so called friends, when I was in high school. All of us were pretty good in school, but not cool. A couple of them were overweight and then there was me! (Jane is not even 5' tall, with a very petite build.) They all had tough family situations. But you know, of the six of us girls, five of them got married within two years of graduating. I was the only one who didn't. I always wondered what was wrong with me. Why did no one want me? No big deal, I guess. I was so loyal to those girls, but they'd turn on me whenever a cool kid paid any attention to them. It used to make me so angry."*

No matter what I tried, Jane would not talk about her siblings.

Nor would she talk about whether or not her family offered her any support or comfort after the death of her first husband. She kept shrugging and telling me she had never thought about it much and insisted her parents' response to the whole situation was "*entirely legitimate. In fact, I'd say they responded far better than they should have!*"

I then tried to ask about how she thought her husband's death affected her.

*Jane: "It was just life. But it certainly made me smarten up and realize there would be much more to lose if I didn't get my act together."*

Ann: "Do you mean you were afraid something worse would happen?"

*Jane: "I guess so. But one time when we were doing the Examen, and I had remembered the time (her son) got into an accident, that was completely his fault. All I kept thinking about*

*was how relieved I was that he wasn't hurt. Then I thought about the fact that there wasn't anything my kids could do that would ever make me stop loving them. Ever...*"

Jane became very teary at this point. She turned her head and looked out the window. It was several minutes before she turned back to me, and looking me straight in the eye, she said, "*Do you know how hard it is for me to do this?*" I told her I was pretty sure that I did.

*"I think I those six weeks made me realize something, something I just can't figure out. What do you do with the reality that no matter how much you try, you just can't keep people safe? So why would I keep getting the impression God doesn't want me to be afraid? We should be afraid! Very afraid!"*

I then asked her, "Jane, do you think the time you spend listening to God during the *Examen* has made you wonder at all about your interpretation of the suffering you have been through?"

*"Yes. But if I'm wrong, what else have I been wrong about?"*

She asked me this as if I was challenging everything else about her interpretation of Christian faith. I waited to see what else she would say.

*"I'm not a loveable person Ann. I have accepted that."*

"What if that is the very thing you are wrong about Jane?" Her eyes once again welled up with tears and she gathered up her belongings.

*"I need to think about that."* And with that, she ended our conversation.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> What I think is significant to note here is the rich biblical imagery Jane's Evangelical heritage has made available to her, even despite her resistance to its truths.

### Betty's Story:

*"I have actually been looking forward to doing this a second time around because I think I learned something very significant through the Examen. I discovered there is so much more going on than what I see and what I'm aware of!"*

*"God provided some real clarity for me during those Monday nights, about some issues I have been struggling to make sense of. I think he did this by just increasing my confidence that I really hear his voice and I'm not just making it up."*

*"The slowness or maybe the quietness of the Examen helps me to slow down and the anxiety I typically feel, also becomes quieter. I think this is why I started to do the Examen on my own, apart from Mondays, because I found it very, very soothing, even when God didn't seem to be saying a lot."*

*"If there is one thing I learned while playing the piano it is the value of 'practice', but I'd never thought about it in light of my faith before. And I can't believe how hard such a ridiculously simple thing can be!"*

*"I can't believe how differently I'm seeing things when I begin to see them through God's eyes. I keep hearing him ask me the same question over and over, 'Betty, what is most true and most real about this situation?' This has helped override my constant awareness of the lack of resources I feel I have to meet the challenges I'm facing and enables me to be mindful that I do not face life alone, or with only the resources I can see."*

*"I've been thinking about my dad too. About the fact that he grew up with a father who was a tough, hard-working, alcoholic rancher and all my dad wanted to do was play the piano and sing! His mother doted on him and even bought him a piano. My dad was a total mama's boy. He was also the first person to go to university in his entire small town. I wonder what all of that was like for him. And I wonder how much his own childhood warped his idea of what a dad was supposed to be. It kind of has helped me have more compassion on him...and even on me."*

*"I've also been asking God to help me see how my dad's behaviour is affecting my other relationships, especially with (her husband) and the kids. Dad never listened to me. No wonder*

*I get so angry when I think (her husband) isn't listening to me either."*

*"The Examen also seems to be training my senses and my imagination, which has made me think about how little I think of them as part of the way I relate to God, which is odd when you consider I'm a painter!"*

*"I didn't realize how little I expected from God or how awkward it felt to wait on him to engage with me...it actually felt presumptuous at first."*

*"I have always thought I needed to be perfect for God and now I am thinking about the reality that practice is about honing a skill. With piano, practice is meant to develop muscle memory and your familiarity for what things should sound like. When I practice the Examen it's like I'm becoming accustomed to what God sounds like and familiar with what I feel like when it is his voice I hear and what I feel like when it isn't his voice."*

### **Lauren's Story:**

*"I think the Examen made me see how I have been content to let my suffering overshadow and dominate my whole story – how little I have asked God where he was or what he was doing, especially amidst the most painful bits."*

*"Over the last few weeks I realize that I was holding on to my suffering and allowing it to dominate my story because it elicited sympathy from people and made me feel proud of myself for the way I was coping, as if I was doing it all myself. But in holding on to the pain I wasn't allowing God into the suffering to begin to heal its effects on me because I think I feared what would be left of me, who would I be if I didn't have these dramatic stories to tell? Would people even care about me?"*

*"In telling my story to you I see I've limited my perspective on all that happened only to me. It's also fed my disappointment and anger with God. On the flip side, it has also made me see how extraordinarily faithful God has been to me."*

*"What an incredible exercise this storytelling thing is, to recount my story and hear bits I've never heard before because I see more with the help of time and distance. And now,*

*as I learn to actually give God a chance to respond to me more details are emerging, or the way I see things is changing.”*

*“I see why prayer is called a practice. Wow! It really takes practice to learn to give God time to respond. That sounds silly, but I had to keep choosing to position my body to wait, to actually still myself and all my racing impatient thoughts so that God had time, or room to speak, to show me what he was doing.”*

*“The other thing I’ve been starting to see is how allowing God to speak to me requires me to be willing to allow him to control my story. I don’t like that. I want to control my own narrative and hang on to my anger, my pride, my interpretation of the story.”*

*“The Examen kept showing me how I was looking for sympathy from others to meet my need for affirmation and comfort. Yet God wants to heal me by showing me I wasn’t abandoned, alone, or forsaken. But if he does, what will I have left? Who will I be?”*

### **III. Findings:**

This project’s intent was to determine whether or not two specific practices of faith might provide resources for believers facing suffering. The data focused on the “lived experience” of suffering believers in the midst of these practices, and the impact the practices had on them. As qualitative research is “grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience” (Sensing, 2011, p. 57) this project was a qualitative study and used the methodology of narrative inquiry as its approach to the research.

Through the various sources of data collected (notes taken throughout the two practices of storytelling; transcriptions of the tape recordings taken during the storytelling sessions; field notes taken

throughout the execution of the project; participants' journals from this project and a former project by these same participants; and the researcher's journal) three primary narrative strands emerged, each pertaining to the ways in which the suffering of participants shaped/misshaped their relationships with God, others, and themselves. In the proceeding sections these dominant narrative strands will be explored.

*a) Suffering and Our Relationship with God:*

Suffering is a mysterious beast. It can present itself in a myriad of forms. Its arrival and departure are rarely predictable, just as is our response to its presence. However, there are common experiences it poses.

At the heart of suffering there lies a sense of being abandoned by God, a sense which lay at the core of Christ's cry on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matt 27:46).<sup>135</sup> Similarly, there is a keen sense of God's refusal to remove our suffering, or at the very least, to protect us from it. But both issues confront the believer with a need to construe a means of justifying and/or explaining God's response, or seeming lack of response, to their suffering. Various conclusions are reached. Some determine suffering must be primarily their fault, the result of their sinfulness, spiritual deficiencies, or

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<sup>135</sup> Phil C. Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 66.

weaknesses. This perspective is reflected in Betty's comments, "...*the suffering I have endured, or at least 99% of it, I have brought on myself. I feel a lot of shame and a lot of unworthiness before God.* Or in Jane's insistence, "'*God is done with me. I got what I deserved. Every choice has its consequences, so I have to live with what I've done*". To such believers, God is primarily understood as a righteous judge whose righteousness will always trump mercy.

For others God's all powerful sovereign nature renders God alone to blame for their suffering. I often observe that people think God is simply inattentive, uninterested, or distracted by bigger things. This response is reflected by one participant when she was asked how God viewed her suffering, "*He doesn't. I don't think he has even noticed*".

A similar perspective was echoed by another participant, "*I needed to forgive God! I needed to forgive him for not saving my marriage, for not healing (a close friend), and for not sparing (her child) from so much suffering*".

Either way, this view of God makes God unworthy of worship.

#### *b) Suffering and Our Relationship with Others:*

Yet what we believe to be true of God's character and God's intentions becomes the window through which we view others, as demonstrated by Jane's certainty:

*"People don't like me much – I'm always pushing and challenging their apathy or lack of urgency about the*

*significance of things, especially in the church. People just think I'm a nuisance. But somebody has to care about this stuff!"*

Because Jane has assumed God is apathetic towards to her suffering it has been difficult for her to believe others do not also share this posture. This correlation between our perception of God and how we respond to others was recognized by one participant:

*"I have always assumed God was angry with me, constantly disappointed, you know? It never dawned on me that God wanted to forgive me, that he wanted to remove anything that got between us. I never thought of the cross that way. It was always about guilt and punishment. But the connection between how I feel about being forgiven – like God is grudgingly obligated to do it, and how I feel about people I need to forgive is scary".*

Similarly, Jane was also the only participant who did not speak of any other supportive relationships in her life either. It was almost as though she has believed her decision to marry her first husband left her devoid of being worthy to pursue or respond to relationships, or perhaps it has been her sense of guilt that has robbed her of the faith such relationships might even be possible. This was in sharp contrast to the supportive role both Lauren and Betty's spouses played in their lives, as well as the strong bonds of affection Betty spoke of between her and her younger sibling.

It was also curious to note that though Betty and Jane were brought up in Christian families and were regular attendees of church, neither spoke of the role church played in their stories. It was only

Lauren, whose family came to faith later in her life, that mentioned the significant impact church life played in her family.

*c) Suffering and Our Relationship with Ourselves:*

For most believers, caught in the throes of affliction, our understanding of God is complex, and rarely static; God becomes complicated. Yet it is the image of God we behold that reflects back to us who we are, or who we are not.

Betty believed God was like her father, who only celebrated perfection. This confusion led Betty to believe God also despised and rejected her for her imperfections, just as she assumed of her father, “... *I think a part of me has always believed God would only ever be happy with me if I was perfect...and if I made him look good. But I can't ever manage either*”.

Or Jane, who believed, “*God can actually be a bit of...well, a prick. Can I say that? I probably shouldn't say that. I mean we get what we deserve from him, don't we? But sometimes I wonder what the point is*”.

What was troublesome to me, and reflected in the stories of all three participants, was the negative impact fathers played on each participant's relationship with God. This was most apparent with Betty, but present and equally powerful with Jane, whose father seemed to

relinquish all parental authority to his wife. As with Lauren, whose father was unable to be emotionally and physically present to his family.

It was encouraging to see how some of the distorted perceptions participants held of God were altered, or at least brought into question, through their experiences of storytelling and the *Examen*:

*“...What an incredible exercise this storytelling thing is, to recount my story and hear bits I’ve never heard before because I see more with the help of time and distance. And now, as I learn to actually give God a chance to respond to me, more details are emerging, and the way I see things is changing.”*

*“I think I assumed God was harsher, bossier, more like a bully really. But a bully who always got his way. But the person I have encountered is far gentler, kinder, and even, well, kind of funny! Do you think God might have a sense of humour?”*

*“I can’t believe how differently I see things when I begin to see them through God’s eyes. I keep hearing him ask me the same question over and over, ‘Betty, what is ‘most true’ and ‘most real’ (a concept she heard in a previous research project with me) about this situation?’ This has helped override my constant awareness of the lack of resources I have to meet the challenges I’m facing and enables me to be mindful that I do not face life alone, or only with the resources I can see”.*

*d) Concluding Comments:*

It was moving to see the level of intimacy and the degree of trust participants were willing to offer one another. One participant noted how surprising it was to find herself sharing intimate details of her life with people she *“barely knew, yet people I knew understood when I didn’t always have words to say”*.

The mutual suffering present within the lives of these women

seem to create a peculiar and particular form of comradeship between them, a comradeship that transcended all the social distinctions which otherwise might have kept them at a distance from one another.

The most moving aspect of the project for me occurred as I read through the data from the final two weeks of the project. An emerging sense of hopefulness was evident amongst the participants' comments, particularly around the possibility God might actually be *for* them, not against them. Comments such as, *"I have struggled to convince y kids that I am not their enemy, but their ally, regardless of how things appear to them. How like me they are!"*

Another woman noted, *"God has become to show me that as a grade one teacher most of my students implicitly trust me. They assume if I ask them to do something it must be good, and the right thing to do. This is the same kind of trust God wants me to have in him."*

This movement towards hopefulness was perhaps best captured for me by the transformation which came over Jane's face each time I told her that her story mattered because she mattered - she mattered a great deal to God. Each time I said these things Jane's demeanour, which at first would be stiff, guarded, and self-protective, would completely alter. She became teary. Her face would then soften and become more radiant, more beautiful. And a tenderness would surface in her, which seemed to bely the poignant longing, and hopefulness in her heart, that

my words actually be true.

It was both heartwarming and heartbreaking to witness the intensity of Jane's longing to believe God was not who she believed God to be. Just as it was to reflect on this similar hopefulness amongst the two other participants. Though there is a concern for the fragility of this hope, I trust these "dimly burning wick(s) (God) will not quench".

#### **IV. Assumptions and Biases:**

Sensing warns of the necessity for researchers to be aware of their personal biases when conducting research.<sup>136</sup> I recognize my biases in several aspects of this research project.

First, I realized several of the interview questions I had written assumed suffering believers would have thought deeply about how their faith affected their experience(s) of affliction. This was not always the case, which meant some of the participants struggled to process their experiences for the first time within the context of their practice of storytelling. This occurred despite being forewarned about the central focus of the project.

Secondly, though I attempted to mitigate the reflexivity and reciprocity of both my personal relationship with each woman and their knowledge of my own experiences with suffering, both played an

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<sup>136</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock Publishing, 2011), 45-46.

undeniable role in the dynamics of these practices. In gathering the data, the mutual empathy and trust that had been previously created by the shared knowledge of one another's suffering, was readily apparent. Sharing experiences of suffering creates an intimacy and builds trust between people in ways little else can, to which returning war veterans can attest. I believe, though, this trust and intimacy enabled the participants to be vulnerable and more candid throughout both the practices of storytelling and the *Examen*, and therefore led to richer data.

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This dynamic also posed a challenge for me, as I needed to be aware of it as I accompanied the participants through both practices, and in the analysis of the data. I attempted to mitigate, or at least to minimize, this issue, by reviewing the data with a second party unfamiliar with the participants. I still believe it is unreasonable to discount both my prior knowledge of the participants and their stories, as well as biases my own suffering has likely produced in me.

Perhaps the most formidable obstacle created by my assumptions and biases centred around the methodology of Narrative Inquiry and the philosophical prejudices and tensions this research methodology brought forth as I struggled to develop a data presentation I believed would have value and legitimacy.

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<sup>137</sup> It is worth noting the impact my own experiences of suffering likely brought to bear on the data collection in particular, as I felt a high degree of empathy for the participants and their experiences.

What I discovered as I began to correlate and code the data was a constant tension and concern about my need to present these stories without imposing a matrix of categorization and implied interpretation on them, which Narrative Inquiry requires. My academic training had taught me to value research findings presented in particular ways, ones which detach participants from the data and therefore infer a degree of objectivity in doing so. I had also come to equate good data analysis with certainty. But I knew if I submitted these participants' narratives to this kind of categorical presentation and attempted to analyze the data to try and extract certainties I would risk distorting the data and its integrity, let alone fail to honestly reflect what participants had experienced. If I insisted on trying to manipulate the data to make it appear less ambiguous than it was, and my observations more conclusive than they were, the entire point of the research would be lost. But more importantly, I would prove unworthy of the gifts participants had so bravely entrusted to me. I wanted the lived experiences of the participant's suffering to speak for themselves, which is why narrative inquiry was the research methodology I had chosen in the first place.

In many ways, I experienced an ethical dilemma through the process of using narrative inquiry as my approach to this research. When it came time to present the data I wrestled with my desire to present it in orderly, concise, well-defined categories. But narrative data tends more towards ambiguities, uncertainties, and subtle nuances than this type of

systematic data analysis and presentation permits. Clandinin and Connelly refer to systematic data presentation as either ‘formalistic’ or ‘reductionistic’ research texts.<sup>138</sup> They believe the presentation of data analysis in this manner imposes a form of reductionism and depersonalization on the data, which in this case, would have falsified the actual experiences of both the participants and the researcher. My struggle was then to “find a form to represent their stories in storied ways, not to represent stories lived as exemplars of formal categories”.<sup>139</sup> To do otherwise would have been like a physician giving a diagnosis having refused to listen to the patient’s history. This experience left me thinking Clandinin and Connelly were astute when they observed, “...to do good research, one needs to be a good human being”.<sup>140</sup>

I had chosen this particular methodology because of the nature of what was being studied. But the methodology also ended up protecting the inescapably personal and authentic experiences of the participants. Suffering happens to *persons* and people cannot be reduced to neat and tidy categories with clear and concise descriptors. Nor can suffering. If ever an experience confronted people with their inability to control and contain and categorize their lives, it is the experience of suffering. Suffering introduces elements of chaos, confusion, ambiguity, disorientation, and contradictions as little else does. It is not surprising

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<sup>138</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 140.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>140</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 17.

then, that this was precisely what the participants shared, and what precisely what I experienced in attempting to ‘corral’ the data I had collected.

**CHAPTER FIVE:**  
**Theological Reflections**

This project considered two theological issues, suffering and practices of faith. As the issue of practices of faith have been explored in Chapter Two and will be once again in Chapter Six, it is the issue of suffering to which we will presently attend.

Up until this point we have confined our attention to the specific experiences of the research project. In this chapter, we will be broadening our perspective by exploring the issue of suffering and its impact on believers. First, we will explore some of the challenges suffering poses and the questions it can evoke in us. In response to this exploration I suggest a robust familiarity with the doctrine of creation could assist us in responding to these questions, thereby providing a means of resourcing believers to face suffering faithfully. It is the doctrine of creation that teaches us the meta-narrative of the gospel, the narrative in which all our stories are held and upheld. It is this narrative that proclaims to us what is most real and most true about our lives, even amidst the fires of affliction.

Secondly, the project's data revealed how suffering has shaped and misshaped the participants' relationship with God, with others, and with themselves. But the context in which we learn to understand and respond to suffering is not only comprised of our families and the church, but our

culture as well. How do the dominate narratives in our culture contribute to the shaping and misshaping of our response to suffering?

### **I. The Challenges Faced Amidst Suffering:**

Suffering is the great equalizer for all of humankind; no one is immune to its presence. This means it is impossible to discuss suffering without being aware its sources are unique and as varied as there are people. But there are commonalities to these challenges which revolve around the ways in which suffering forces us to ask questions about **who** we are; **why** suffering is happening; and **how** we will be able to face the future.

#### *a) Who am I?*

There is both external and internal disorientation that occurs amidst suffering. Suffering tests the structures we rely on for our understanding about who we are and what our purpose is in life. On the surface these questions typically pertain to our social identity, but looking more deeply they ask what it is that lays at the root of our very being and why we exist at all.<sup>141</sup>

Suffering has a way of disorienting our understanding of identity and purpose. This disorientation produces a sense of isolation and alienation from others, and even ourselves, because suffering alters us; we become other than who we were previously.<sup>142</sup> This internal confusion is magnified by the reality our external place of belonging is often altered too, leaving us no longer certain of where we belong. The rhythms or

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<sup>141</sup> Dorothy Soelle, *Suffering*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Books, 1975), 13-14.

<sup>142</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 76.

routines that once defined and determined who we were and what we needed to do no longer exist, or exist in some truncated, foreign manner leaving us feeling lost and displaced. Our confusion about our identity is further complicated by the peculiar sense of failure and even shame that seems to come along with suffering.<sup>143</sup> It is as if the very fact we are facing affliction is a reflection of a weakness or deficiency on our part, or worse, indicative of some secret sin or attitude we possess, which indeed might be the case.<sup>144</sup> Regardless, we are then left not only feeling isolated and alienated, but afraid, anxious and angry as our suffering is only further exacerbated by questions and maybe even suspicions of why we are experiencing affliction in the first place. We are then left with the impression we have been abandoned on top of everything else.<sup>145</sup>

Despite a sense of being abandoned, rarely do we suffer alone. Because of this our suffering stands as a harsh reminder to others that we *all* live in a broken world. The reality of our suffering then strikes a blow at the façades and platitudes perhaps we, and those around us, have relied on in order to insulate ourselves from suffering.<sup>146</sup> This affront can complicate our suffering because we may feel compelled (or sadly, forced) to contend not only with our own vulnerabilities, but also with those around us. So, a peculiar dance ensues where in fear or helplessness others choose to withdraw from us and/or we from them, only further deepening our sense of isolation, alienation and abandonment.<sup>147</sup>

Affliction not only reveals the truth we are all vulnerable, but also discloses our dependency on forces beyond our control. In cultures like ours, that celebrate and

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>144</sup> Dorothy Soelle, *Suffering*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Books, 1975), 22.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>146</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silence*, (NY: T & T Clark, 1990), 49.

<sup>147</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, (NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 159.

elevate the idea we can be independent and in control of our lives and our destinies, suffering is an intolerable enemy to be avoided or denied.<sup>148</sup> Suffering serves as a stark, relentless presence that mocks the absurdity of such beliefs, and the time, money and energy that is poured into trying to make the illusion a reality.<sup>149</sup>

In the same way suffering exposes the futility of the ways we attempt to insulate ourselves, as suffering has a heartless way of unmasking any false pretensions we might have about our character and who/what it is we worship. Just like a storm at sea tests the integrity of a boat and the strength of its anchor, so the relentless pressures of suffering test all we are and what we have chosen as the anchor for our lives. Which is why questions of identity always go hand in hand with our sense of purpose, as *whom* we are is wed to *why* we are.<sup>150</sup>

But these ontological and teleological questions go far below the surface of our social existence, forcing us to wonder about why it is we exist at all and for what purpose. When things that once gave our lives a sense of its coherence and direction are threatened or removed it can beg the question, “Is this all I was meant to be and do?”<sup>151</sup> These questions can be disturbing if the assumption is life exists merely as the result of molecules randomly colliding - if there is no personal basis or intention for our existence outside of fate or that which we create for ourselves.

Suffering leads us to these questions because in its wake we are forced to grapple with what it is that gives our life meaning and purpose. Similarly, affliction causes us to

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<sup>148</sup> Jonathan R. Wilson, *God's Good World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 197.

<sup>149</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, (NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 95.

<sup>150</sup> Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edit., (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 19.

<sup>151</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, (NY: Image Doubleday, 1972), 55-83.

ask whether or not the possibility of hope even exists and if there is meaning to our suffering. But perhaps most poignantly of all, it can leave us wondering if there will ever be life beyond our suffering.<sup>152</sup>

*b) Why is this happening?*

Suffering is typically accompanied by a steady, relentless stream of questions for which we crave unedited, honest responses that do not minimize, rationalize, or justify what is going on. But the answers which once satisfied us before no longer seem adequate, or even appropriate.<sup>153</sup> In fact, the very presence of answers can often seem offensive, dishonest, and disrespectful in light of the weightiness of our painful circumstances. Any response bearing a whiff of superficiality or condescension only exacerbates the agony we are experiencing, which means for many of us the mirage of all we thought we believed dissipates and we are left with the remnants (ruins?) of what we truly believe - about ourselves, others, and most especially about God. Pretense and posturing vanish and in their place, are left doubts, hidden fears, and anger about why bad things happen. Pain seems to demand we name whom or what is responsible for its presence. So, the avalanche of questions continues: Why is this happening? What have I done/not done? Is this my fault? Where is God? Why is God not intervening? Does God not care? Is God not sovereign? Is God not all-powerful? In anger and frustration at God's apparent absence or impotence and our own sense of helpless or guilt, we cry out

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<sup>152</sup> Conversely, suffering can also awaken us to human limitations, something we tend to deny in the rational scientific stream of culture. As Charles Taylor notes, Western culture has pursued meaning in one of two main streams, rational science and technology or Romanticism. When suffering exposes the limits of these branches capacity to provide meaning, it may open us up once again to transcendent grace and become a pathway for a renewed sense of purpose.

<sup>153</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 90.

to God to attend to us, to act, or at the very least, to answer us. This crying out, this lament is rarely perceived as strange or offensive to non-believers. It is almost expected or understood someone should be made to answer for the pain because we all instinctively feel *this should not be! This is not right!*<sup>154</sup> Yet oddly enough it is not uncommon to encounter believers who chastise those who protest or lament because of their pain. Their messages are subtle (and not so subtle) as they insist suffering is one of God's finest pedagogical tools and therefore our protest or lament is a declaration that questions and/or disrespects God's omniscience.<sup>155</sup>

Questions about why we are suffering can lead us to wonder why all of the means we have sought to insulate ourselves from suffering have failed us. We were told if we worked hard enough, played fair, believed and behaved 'properly' we would be safe – such are the illusions and idolatrous notions our culture (and church?) perpetuates. But suffering exposes their fraudulency.<sup>156</sup> No position, power, possessions, positive attitude, nor even faith can shield any of us from the devastating news our baby is terminally ill, a family member has been killed in a car accident, or a cancer diagnosis. No matter who we are, what we have, what we think or believe, every one dies. Suffering is a visceral reminder we are all subject to the consequences of living in a broken world.

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<sup>154</sup> Maybe this is why I have observed that in the midst of suffering talk of God rarely seems out of place.

<sup>155</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, (NY: T & T Clark, 1990), 83.

<sup>156</sup> Jonathan R. Wilson, *God's Good World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2013), 196.

c) How will we face the future?

What lies at the end of our suffering matters, as much as the promise our suffering *will* end - ask mothers in labour. But not knowing how long labour will last is a source of enormous anxiety. Most of us can endure pain if we know how long it will go on and if we believe the end is worth the struggle. It is quite a different matter when there appears to be no end in sight, as all our resources have limitations. How we will manage is about the resources we are certain are available to us socially, financially, physically etc. Do I face today alone? Do I have more than what I can see at my disposal? Is there anything being done to help me? And what about tomorrow? Can I anticipate tomorrow with hope and assurance or am I filled with fear and dread? So much of our response to these questions is determined by whether we believe life to be a burden and a curse to be endured or a gift intended to bless us. Consequently, *how* we manage in our affliction is inextricably linked to our understanding of *why* we exist, and toward what purpose our life is headed.

**II. The Doctrine of Creation:**

a) Introduction

Stories cannot spare us from suffering, nor can they change our circumstances or obviate the pain suffering brings into our lives. But stories have the ability to help us remember what remains true and most real, despite our circumstances. Stories have the ability to reframe our lives and restore our perspective by enabling us to see beyond what is happening right in front of us. Like a map clearly indicates “you are here”,

which allows us to situate ourselves relative to our destination, stories can provide us with a way forward, a sense of direction when suffering makes us feel lost.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is *The Story*. It is the meta-narrative of all stories, for all of creation, for all time. This gospel reveals to us how our story began and where our story is headed because our beginning has always had our ‘end’ in mind. The gospel not only tells us where we have come from, but where we are going and how God is getting us there. We are told the one who created us is also the one who has redeemed us and who is, even now, bringing creation to its proper fulfillment in the new creation.<sup>157</sup> And because this gospel construal is *The Story* even though we walk through much suffering we can have the assurance our present stories are not finished and their endings are not determined by suffering and death, but by the *telos* for which God created all life – the holy, joyful mystery of redemption.<sup>158</sup> Redemption is the completion of creation, the ushering in of new creation, so this is where our story is headed.

As I have walked alongside believers who are suffering what has struck me is the fragmented understanding they have regarding the arc of God’s story, the framework in which all our stories are held. As affliction causes a fragmentation in our lives all of its own, piecing together how the one fits into the other becomes nearly impossible.<sup>159</sup> We assume a familiarity with God’s story, but it seems most of us live as though the story begins in Genesis 1-3, skips to the gospels, touches down here in there amongst Paul’s letters and then finishes with heaven. There is no coherency between *The Story’s*

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<sup>157</sup> Jonathan Wilson, *God’s Good World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 183.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>159</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, (NY: Image Doubleday, 1972), 9-26.

beginning and its end; there is no sense of the steadfast, faithful trajectory of God's good intentions for creation, of its *telos*.<sup>160</sup>

This trajectory, the *telos* of creation, is defined for us in the doctrine of creation. This doctrine does not give us an answer *to* our suffering, but it does teach us of the grander framework in which our suffering, our stories, are taking place and therefore being held.<sup>161</sup> Within this framework, we are provided with hope as we are reminded of what is most true and most real about our life, even despite our present suffering.

#### b) The Story

There are essential elements required for a story. Stories must have a beginning, middle, and an end, referred to as a 'narrative arc'. The narrative arc enables the author to maintain the direction of the story, as the end pulls the story ever forward.

The doctrine of creation is the narrative arc of God's story. We know how the story begins and how it will end, so no matter where we find ourselves in the midst of the story we can know for certain the direction in which God is taking us. This can be an enormous source of hope when suffering leaves us confused and uncertain about the future. In the case of this *Story*, knowing the author, the one who is creating, sustaining, and bringing the story to its fulfillment is critical to our confidence and why we can indeed take hope in this *Story*.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> See Jonathan Wilson's *God's Good World*, "Part I" for a rich exposition of how this doctrine has fallen out of favour and familiarity within the church, the academy, and society. Jonathan Wilson, *God's Good World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2013), part I.

<sup>161</sup> The answer *to* our suffering is addressed in the doctrine of redemption.

<sup>162</sup> James M. Houston, *The Creator*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishing, 2007), 54-56.

c) Who is behind the story?

God is the author of this story. We know God's character is the same yesterday, today and forever so all the actions that have occurred, are occurring, and will occur in God's story reflect God's character (Heb. 13:8). God's actions are always consistent with God's character; God's being is the basis of God's doing.<sup>163</sup> God's character is therefore always expressed in God's actions, as Paul states, "God is faithful; he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). What then does the doctrine of creation teach us about God?

Genesis begins by immediately identifying God as the author of *The Story*, "In the beginning when God created" or "...when God began to create..." (Gen. 1:1, NRSV).<sup>164</sup> God is *the* subject, source, initiator, and Creator of all life.<sup>165</sup> The verb 'to create' implies an agent behind the action, and intentionality.<sup>166</sup> In Genesis God *speaks* and the cosmos come into being (1:1-25). Then God *determines* humankind should be made in God's likeness and so in 2:7 we find God *forming* man from the dust of the earth and God *animating* man with his own breath. Likewise, with his own hands God *takes* a rib from man and *fashions* woman (2:21-22). God is a 'hands on' Creator intimately involved with his creation. And God is creating freely, not out of need, but out of desire and pleasure! (See 1:4,10,12,17,21,25,31)<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III: The Doctrine of Creation*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958-61), 9.

<sup>164</sup> David M. Carr, Genesis 1:1 textual note offers this alternative translation.

<sup>165</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III: The Doctrine of Creation*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958-61), 7.

<sup>166</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 44.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Throughout scripture we are reminded our Creator is intimately involved in the fashioning, forming, and animating of all he has created. <sup>168</sup> “For it was you (God) who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb...I have been fearfully and wonderfully made...intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance” (Ps. 139:13-16a). Our Creator, God, has created us with great care and intention. We are known because our Creator has personally, lovingly, and carefully fashioned us. As if to underscore the tenderness with which God views us, we read, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I (God) will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands...” (Isa. 49:15-16). God never forgets his creation.

As the source of all life, God is then the ontological foundational for all of creation. If God is the source of our being what is God’s nature and why is this significant to us in the midst of suffering?

Scriptures reveal to us God is three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each differentiated from the other, each existing for the other in eternal, intimate, loving fellowship. Genesis 1:26, 27 tell us humankind has been made in the image of God. We have been created out of the overflowing, eternal love, and life of a personal God. As creatures of God we are other than God, who is “set apart from creation, yet not set against it”. <sup>169</sup> We too are persons created to enjoy intimate, loving, personal fellowship with God, to be a part of the life and love of the community of the Triune God. This explains our need for intimate relationship and our longing to belong for it is at the very

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<sup>168</sup> Wm. P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 81

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

heart of our being and the very reason for which we have been created.<sup>170</sup> Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live *from* the life and love of the other, so they live *for* each other, interdependent *on* one another. Therefore, we are not only dependent on God for our life, but we are interdependent on one another because our life at its heart is relational. Notions of independence, “going it alone”, or “every man is an island” assault our very nature.<sup>171</sup> We then not only need God, but we need each other in order to function as we have been created.<sup>172</sup>

We have been intimately, intentionally created for life and for love by the very one who has created all that is in heaven and earth, the very one on whom all creation is dependent to sustain its life. Each breath we take can serve as a reminder our existence comes as a *gift* from God and reflects God’s intimate care and desire for us.<sup>173</sup> Each sunrise and sunset demonstrates God’s ongoing creative work, daily bearing witness to the reality that all of creation is being upheld and sustained by God.

Genesis 1-2 makes the role of God the Father clear, but it also notes the presence of God the Spirit, “...moving/hovering over the surface of the water” (Gen. 1:2).<sup>174</sup> While John 1:1-18 attests to the role of God the Son in original creation. John 1:1 states, “In the beginning was the Word” paralleling Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God”. In doing so John equates the Word, Jesus the Son, with God the Father. To make the relationship between the two more explicit John says, “The Word was God”, and “He

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<sup>170</sup> See Eph. 1:9-10.

<sup>171</sup> James M. Houston, *The Creator*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 25.

<sup>172</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 84.

<sup>173</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III: The Doctrine of Creation*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958-61), 95.

<sup>174</sup> The term “Father” is used of God most especially in the Johannine writings and in I and II Peter. But it also appears in Acts, Hebrews, Jude and is extensively used in the Pauline corpus.

(the Word) was in the beginning with God” (John 1:2). The apostle emphasizes the role of the Word with God in original creation: “All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1:3). So, both the connection and the differentiation of roles between the Father and the Son in original creation are made apparent. We know then that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each were involved in bringing the original creation into existence. Yet John is also making parallels between the first creation and that which God is doing through the Son via the Spirit in the second creation, redeeming creation for *new creation*.

It is also important to note that this is a God who speaks, a God who answers us as the *Word*,

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways...but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:1-3a).

d) What happened?

Love requires freedom. As such, because we were created out of love we were gifted with the intrinsic ability to choose other than God.<sup>175</sup> In Genesis 3 this is exactly what transpires. Creation rebels against God and chooses to no longer align itself with God’s life and good purposes. In doing so, death entered creation distorting its identity and purpose and setting creation on a trajectory of death.<sup>176</sup> *This* death or sin, and the

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<sup>175</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. P. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 77.

<sup>176</sup> I think it is important to distinguish between death, which gives life as we witness in the botanical and animal worlds, from death that threatens and negates life and is not *for* the service of creation’s flourishing and greater abundance. Here my thinking has been influenced by Douglas John Hall’s, *God and Human Suffering*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, p. 62-69 and several discussions with Dr. Loren Wilkinson, primarily in August, 2014.

suffering it introduced in creation, was never what God intended; it was alien to creation. No longer being properly aligned with God, creation was no longer in proper relationship with itself. All that worked for life and its flourishing and abundance and giftedness became distorted and with it creation lost sight of its true identity and purpose. Though God intended creation to be governed by giving and receiving, misalignment with God meant creation became a place of taking and keeping. God's *shalom* was replaced by fear and fragmentation. Creation was broken and suffering began.

e) *Is that it?*

God's response to creation's rebellion was not to abandon it. In Genesis 3:21, "...the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them". God continued to care for his creation and sought to cover their shame. But the intimate fellowship for which they had been created was broken, and creation had to leave its home (3:23-24).

But as noted earlier, God's character is always expressed in God's action and the character of God cannot overlook or tolerate that which is contrary or incompatible to who God is, for this would require God to deny himself. God therefore cannot condone sin – all that is contrary to love or life and its flourishing and abundance, all that is out of keeping with who God is. Because God *does* what God *is*, God has taken action to remediate the damage and destruction of sin. <sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 1992), 104-105.

We see God's restorative actions to redeem creation sweep from one end of *the* story to its fulfillment. In the Old Testament, we see God creating a people, Israel, to bear witness to God. God made a covenant with Israel and promised through them would come a Messiah who would save Israel and all creation from the tyranny of sin and its trajectory, death, under whose reign all creation is held captive.<sup>178</sup> In the New Testament Paul recounts the work God has accomplished to bring about the fulfillment of this covenantal promise and the extravagant benefits bestowed upon Israel, and all of us, as a result (see Eph. 1:3-14). The covenant is the promise of God's faithfulness and the inner basis of creation; it's ontological explanation. Creation then is the external basis of covenant, where the reality and integrity of God is made manifest, first through Israel and then through the Son.<sup>179</sup> Paul sums up the work of the Triune God in fulfilling God's promises of redeeming all of creation for new creation, for new life is the "plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him (Jesus Christ, the Messiah), things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). But how is this redemptive activity related to creation? And how might this be a resource for us in the midst of suffering?

In Ephesians 1:4-5 we see the connection between our creation and redemption, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will..." In other words, "long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love"! (Eph. 1:4-5, MSG)

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

We see all of God's actions, in both God's creating and redeeming, are accomplished "in Christ", "through Christ", "in the Beloved" or "in him" (see 1:3-8). The work of the Father has always been, continues to be, and always will be, done through the Son. The Son reveals the Father to us (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:15). It is the Son who chose to lay down his glory and power and position to become the one who suffers *with* creation and *for* creation that he might give life once again *to* creation. It is the Son who intimately fashioned creation who now intimately enters *into* the brokenness of creation to share and bear the consequences of its sin, yet was without sin. It is the Son who chose to be tempted in every way we are, yet refused to turn away from God, from his love, and his life. Instead the Son willingly gave himself to be ravaged by that which ravages all of creation- death. The cross is the crux of the doctrine of creation, where creation and redemption meet in the flesh of God; God died our death that we might have God's life. The cross expresses God's faithfulness to creation and God's plans for its redemption because the other half of the creation story is the *redemption* story! God comes *to* creation, *as* creation, not to rescue it *from* creation, but to free it from what which is not creation, not part of God's life or love, death.<sup>180</sup> Consequently, it is impossible to separate creation's ontological roots from its teleological roots. "Through Jesus Christ we meet 'the secret of creation' – the identity of the Creator and nature of creation...the revelation that redemption and creation belong together".<sup>181</sup> Our Creator *is* our Redeemer! Which then means *who* we are is directly correlated to *why* we are and all God has done, is doing, and will do to see that God's intentions for us are fulfilled.

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>181</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III: The Doctrine of Creation*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958-61), 28.

f) Concluding comments

There are not answers to most of our questions, but there is an Answerer.<sup>182</sup> The Word, who comes *to* us, is present *with* us in our suffering and declares, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30) there **will** be an end to all of it. What is then *most* real and *most* is true, “is not the end of dying, but the promise that death **will** be swallowed up in life”.<sup>183</sup> The resurrection means the Word will be eternally with us. We do not face life alone. He lives! And his Spirit seals us and assures us of this very truth, “...as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come...” (2 Cor. 1:22, NIV). It is this same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead who likewise enables us to choose God, to be aligned with God’s life and love, to trust God, refusing to be mastered any longer by sin.<sup>184</sup>

“...by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a Spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a Spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God...” (Rom. 8:13-16).

The power this world deems most powerful is death. Jesus exposed the limitations of death on the cross and the illusion of its mastery over creation by utterly destroying it when he rose from the dead. Christ’s resurrection is the demonstration of the power of

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<sup>182</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 94.

<sup>183</sup> Colin. E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 24.

<sup>184</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, (NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 65.

life.<sup>185</sup> If this is true, then suffering **will not** have the final say in our story because our stories are held within *The Story* whose trajectory is not death, but new creation.<sup>186</sup>

Our affliction is real. Yet through the incarnation God has supplied us with certainty that not only does God deal with what is real, God has taken our suffering so seriously that he has entered into it himself in order to redeem us by redeeming our suffering.<sup>187</sup> God has not avoided our pain, but instead the Father sent his son Jesus Christ, who in tasting creation's deepest sorrow validates the reality of our affliction because he too experiences it so that we might not be imprisoned by it.<sup>188</sup> Jesus is our companion in suffering who shows us the way through suffering, through obedience to the Spirit, the one who animates life within us and leads us to freedom.<sup>189</sup> The Spirit assures us of what is true – we are not abandoned; we are not alien, nor are we alienated from God, nor will this suffering determine the end of our story. Jesus is present with us and promises to redeem what seems unredeemable and declares over us there **will** indeed be a day when, "...he will wipe every tear from (our) eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more (Rev. 21:3-4). Jesus has given us his word because he is the Word in

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<sup>185</sup> Jonathan R. Wilson, *God's Good World*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2013), 198.

<sup>186</sup> Sometimes I wonder if we do not misunderstand power. Thinking of Jesus hanging on the cross, don't we wonder, as the crowd did, 'God, why didn't you use your power and save him?' But he was. We just could not see it.

<sup>187</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 35.

<sup>188</sup> Sigurd Bergman, trans. by Douglas Stott, *Creation Set Free*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 147.

<sup>189</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 54.

whom all life is found and for whom we have been created – Jesus is the *telos* of creation, he is our home and where we are headed.<sup>190</sup>

### **III. How the Dominate Cultural Powers Shape and Misshape our Response to Suffering:**

Our cultural narratives have spawned certain values we have come to admire and celebrate, as healthy and normative aspects of personal development. I have chosen four of these values to facilitate our reflection: personal responsibility; uniqueness; God’s personal agency in our lives; and freedom of choice.

#### ***a) Values***

##### ***(i) Personal Responsibility:***

North American culture places a high value on the individual and on our personal responsibility not only to ‘create’ a life for ourselves, but also to navigate the consequences of the choices we make along the way. The future, we are told, is in our hands and is therefore limited only by the limitations of our imagination and our willingness to work hard. Obstacles, barriers, and challenges of any kind merely test our resilience, ingenuity, and our determination to ‘make something of ourselves’. We are not to presume assistance will be provided, but instead we are to figure things out on our

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<sup>190</sup> Jonathan R. Wilson, *God’s Good Creation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 259.

own, bearing our own burdens. Independence and self-reliance are both expected and celebrated.<sup>191</sup>

There is a lot to be grateful for in this attitude, as it requires us to take responsibility for our choices and our lives, and as Paul says, ‘to bear our own burdens’ (Gal. 6:5). It also encourages us to draw on strengths and resiliency we might not otherwise know we had. There can be a maturation and confidence that develops in us as we step out and begin to exercise our abilities to manage our lives.

But there is a misshaping of the value we place on personal responsibility, which becomes apparent in the ways we respond to suffering. I refer to the most common of these misshapen responses as the “Superman”, the “Invisible Man” and the “Victim”.

The “Superman” approach to suffering reflects the attitude we must be brave and deal valiantly with whatever life dishes out. “Superman” believes suffering must be met without flinching or showing any sign of weakness. “Superman” believes it is up to us to find solutions to the ‘problems’ at hand and fix them with a mixture of strength, tenacity, and endurance. “Superman” believes we should be able to handle whatever circumstances we face if we are strong enough.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Paul Spencer Williams, “Globalization and the Logic of Capitalism,” in *The Gospel and Globalization: Exploring the Religious Roots of a Globalized World*, ed. Michael W. Goheen and Erin G. Glanville (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing/Geneva Society, 2009), 129-130.

<sup>192</sup> In chapter 1, “Freedom and Unfreedom” of William T. Cavanaugh’s *Being Consumed: The Economics of Desire* the author provides a sobering reflection on the implications of viewing ourselves as independent entities who exist in a world in which we are required to be self-reliant and self-sustaining, a value birthed from the assumption we must be free from constraints impeding ‘our’ growth or social obligations which deplete ‘our’ resources. Though the context of his argument pertains to economics, the implications spill over into all aspects of our lives. In other words, we are all required to be Supermen and women who are to be free *from*. but with no sense of what we are meant to be free *for*. This notion relies on the fundamental denial of the *telos* of creation or similarly that creation exists beneath a ‘sacred canopy’. See William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 5-7.

The “Invisible Man”, on the other hand, meets the challenges of suffering by turning inward. This response reflects those who believe we must deal with our problems alone, and typically in silence. The “Invisible Man” thinks others should never be burdened with our problems, because they are our private affair. Self-reliance and being self-contained are the ways in which the “Invisible Man” understands what it means to bear our own burdens. <sup>193</sup>

The final misshapen approach to suffering is that of the “Victim”, who believes we are alone in our suffering, abandoned, and without hope. This attitude mirrors the despair many feel and the cynicism that so easily develops when confronted by suffering. There is a sense no matter what we do tragedy will always be waiting around the corner. We are powerless and helpless in the face of anguish or adversity. <sup>194</sup>

What further complicates matters is suffering is often perceived to be the result of some sort of failure on our part, a personal deficit we possess, the result of hidden sin, or worse, merely reflective of God’s displeasure with us. And though some of this may very well be the case, our suffering is then only compounded by shame, guilt, and embarrassment.

Similarly, if we are supposed to be responsible for navigating our suffering alone, or if it is somehow our fault, what is the likelihood we are going to reach out to others who are suffering? Do we not automatically make the same assumptions about the plight of others as we do of own? Do we not assume their suffering is their problem, and likely

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<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>194</sup> Daniel M. Bell Jr., *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Post-Modern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 97.

their fault anyway? Besides, we only have so many resources available, which we need to manage our own situations? <sup>195</sup>

So typically, we resist getting involved in the suffering of others. We fear the messiness, what it might cost us, and whether or not there is really any ‘solution’ to their troubles anyway. These responses cause us to become self-protective, self-preserving, and enforce the belief what we each need to do is to take care of ‘me’ and ‘mine’. <sup>196</sup> When in fact, Paul’s exhortation in Galatians calls us to first help carry one another’s burdens, as well as take responsibility for our own. We have not been asked to bear our burdens alone, because we are not designed to face life alone. Yet our typical response to the suffering of others ends us isolating them and exacerbating their suffering because it reduces suffering people to a problem to be ‘solved’. This too often means those who give voice to their pain end up marginalized, ostracized, and their suffering minimized. <sup>197</sup>

I wonder if suffering is not also an affront to the cultural myth which leads us to believe we are in control of our lives. Being in control is quite a different animal to taking responsibility for our lives. This fear, that we are not in as much control as we are lead to believe, would certainly go a long way to explaining our need to blame people for their suffering.

What about those on the margins of society? Do we not rationalize their suffering too, or worse begrudge them assistance because we do not believe they are entitled to it? Do we not extend our personal explanations for suffering beyond ourselves, our cities

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-106.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-112.

<sup>197</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 50.

and our countries? Do we not presume problems of poverty and crime and war etc. can be similarly reduced to poor individual choices, deficient characters, and a lack of work ethic or initiative amongst people? Do we not even respond to the wider ways in which people are suffering through war, famine, or slavery with the same expectations of personal responsibility and blame? Has individualism so deeply affected our understanding we cannot see the interconnectivity and impact our lifestyle in North America is having on the rest of the world? Have we so narrowed our sense of responsibility that it now extends only as far as our own skin or our fence line? <sup>198</sup>

Perhaps a less obvious result of the weight of our belief that we are responsible to bear our own burdens is the way in which it collapses and distorts our understanding and appreciation of time. <sup>199</sup> If it is all up to us to resolve our problems and mitigate any crisis we encounter, then we are confronted with the limitations of a 24-hour clock and the short breadth of our lifetime in which to make this happen. Time too becomes a scarce resource and our enemy if it alone determines the boundary within which our suffering must be worked out. Time becomes narrowly confined to what is happening in our life's span; history's value erodes and the future is irrelevant. It is only what is happening now that really matters. Yet this perspective not only diminishes the wider stage on which life is playing out and the interconnectivity of our lives presently and

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<sup>198</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 33-58.

<sup>199</sup> See Jonathan Wilson, *God's Good World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 219-222 in which he suggests that the two practices of 'presence and patience' realigns of us in the midst of God's story (time) and saves us from the anxiety and burden we bear living in the world's misconstrued understanding of time.

with the past, it completely negates the reality of God, God's power and purposes, and the trajectory God has determined for all of creation in new creation.<sup>200</sup>

(ii) Uniqueness:

We are also a culture that celebrates the uniqueness of one another and the gifts each of us have been given. These gifts can be simple, yet significant means by which we can meet or manage the suffering we encounter in life. Likewise, we each have unique stories to provide us with the gift of being able to reflect on God's faithfulness to us, which can enable us to have hope for our future. Individualism has enabled us to recognize each one has something to offer; something to contribute that is distinctive and set apart from others. The recognition of individual gifts, talents, and resources has provided the opportunity and/or motivation for such unique capabilities to honed, brought to maturity and enabled to flourish.

But the celebration of the individual fails to take into consideration our uniqueness is only fully expressed when it is operating as a part of the whole body, just as the unique shape and size of a puzzle piece makes sense *when* it is placed alongside all of the other pieces. In fact, our celebration and worship of the individual usurps God position, which disables us from seeing the source of our worth and value is a gift of God and only in worshipping God can any of us fully become all were created and intended to be before God and for one another. By focusing solely on the individual, we diminish our ability to see our fundamental dependency on God and our interdependency on the other.

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<sup>200</sup> See the introduction to Jonathan Wilson's *God's Good World*, particularly p. vii-xii for a more thorough explanation of the necessity of understanding the present in light of the past and the future towards which God is bringing all creation.

Individualism, with its obsession about what it is that makes us unique, leads to a distortion of our identity and the very *telos* for which we have been created – relationship. Our individuation, our uniqueness, is a reflection of the uniqueness and individuation of the Persons of the Trinity. The Father is distinct from the Son who is distinct from the Spirit, but they are One. If the Godhead were not comprised of distinct persons God would not be personal for he would not be in relationship, which presupposes more than one person. Nor would God be love, for love requires persons who freely choose to give and receive from one another. We have been created (and are therefore not God) in God’s image and likeness – unique persons for the purpose of relationship.

Elevating uniqueness ironically ends up producing conformity, as we insist that others bend to our will, our needs and purposes.<sup>201</sup> Diversity and uniqueness are lost because the stronger, the resource-full, will demand the weaker, the resource-less, meet our needs. But it is in the recognition and acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the other that we recognize our own. By diminishing our differences, we end up destroying the very thing we need to fulfill our God-given design for intimate relationship, the other. In so doing we lose the resources of the other God has provided for us.<sup>202</sup> Amidst suffering this is an enormous loss.

This overemphasis of individual uniqueness likewise leads to the distorted perception our gifts comprise the totality of whom we are. Similarly, if we reduce people into mere gifts or talents we reduce them into commodities to be bought or sold, used, manipulated, and discarded. How easy it is to forget the beautiful girl on the

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<sup>201</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 68.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-75.

magazine is also a person, or the latest winner of American Idol is more than a singer, or the doctor more than her/his IQ. When we reduce one another to the sum of what makes us unique we are forced to compare our differences. The comparison leads to competition, making us competitors not companions.<sup>203</sup> We try and ‘sell’ ourselves, promote ourselves trying to secure attention, recognition, and assurance we are loved. But gifts cannot be loved; only persons can be loved. In this game of compare, contrast, and compete people are left in a constant state of need, everyone trying to secure something from the other, no one feeling free enough to give to the other...no one ever feeling like they are enough. Suffering therefore must go underground, it must be denied, diminished, or repackaged so as to not threatened our ‘marketability’, our persona, the narrative we have created about ourselves we believe we keeps suffering at bay, or at the very least, minimizes it.<sup>204</sup>

(iii) Personal Agency:

But it is perhaps the high value we place on our individual uniqueness that enables us to believe in God’s personal agency in our lives. We believe God created ‘me’, God died for ‘me’, and God is at work in ‘me’. The problem with our ease in accepting these things to be true comes from the corollary of this reality. God is not at work in our lives to create isolated persons, but a people. We are meant to become a symphony, not a collection of soloists. The focus on God’s personal agency in our lives causes us to lose sight of the *telos* of God’s grand narrative, that it is not simply about God saving ‘me’, but rather “...to reconcile to himself *all* things, whether on earth or in heaven...” (Col. 1:20, emphasis mine). Through the loss of the bigger picture, which our story (and

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<sup>203</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP,2004), 67-69.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-63.

therefore our suffering) is held within, we fail to apprehend what we see and experience is *not* all that is happening and therefore, this present suffering is *not* all there will be to our story!

By reducing the narrative within which we live we also reduce God and God's role and God's work and God's purposes and power. God becomes 'my' personal deity who must be about what matters most to 'me'.<sup>205</sup> Therefore, if God does not do what I want or provide me with the answers I deem suitable, I do away with God. God then becomes disposable, a caricature of himself, a commodity. But, by implication, so do we.

(iv) Freedom:<sup>206</sup>

Lastly, we value the freedom of choice each of us has to respond to suffering as we see fit. Freedom of choice enables us to determine, without interference, how we believe it is best to deal with our suffering. This value liberates us from having to meet the expectations of others and dignifies us with personal autonomy. Freedom of choice emancipates us from the limitations family, country, race or religious context may wish to impose on us.

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<sup>205</sup> See chapter 8 "The Lie About Us" in Greg Boyd's *Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgment to the Love of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 143-156 for further exploration of this issue.

<sup>206</sup> My thinking about the issue of freedom has been deeply influenced by William T. Cavanaugh's, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008); Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World*, James K. A. Smith, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); Jonathan R. Wilson *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010); and Zygmunt Bauman's works *Liquid Love* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003) and *Collateral Damage* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

But when we say we are free to make our own choices we neglect the reality our choices impact others, quite possibly inhibiting, violating, or perpetuating their lack of freedom.<sup>207</sup> This value of our freedom to choose seems to lack any sense of responsibility we might bear for the implications our choices may impose on others. Our understanding and appropriation of this value seems to imply our freedom to choose is being made in a vacuum and can be exercised without impunity. Yet this approach to freedom leads us to exacerbate the suffering of one another. If each of us are free to decide to do whatever we want and are answerable to no one, it is not difficult to understand why we end up at war, in both the micro and macro sense.<sup>208</sup> With no common purpose or aspiration, we become a collection of individuals all making individual choices, disabling any bonds from being created between us. It is my freedom against yours. Our culture teaches us not only do we have the right to this freedom, but we must be tolerant of one another's choices. But what happens if exercising my freedom means impinging on yours?

And are we really free? How many of our choices are controlled or manipulated by what advertisers tell us we really need? How much of our desire is truly our desire and not fabricated by media and merchandising? What about our greed, anger, lust, and jealousy? Are we free from their hold on us? Are we not all slaves to sin?

We need to ask what it is we are free from and free for? And we must also ask whom it is that bears the cost of my choices? Is my freedom inhibiting, violating, or

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<sup>207</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 42-43.

<sup>208</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love* (Cambridge, UK, 2003), 97-98.

perpetuating the lack of someone else's freedom? Or is my freedom enabling and encouraging the freedom of another? <sup>209</sup>

***b) How to Resist these Values:***

***(i) Personal Responsibility:***

It is good and right for us to take personal responsibility for ourselves, recognizing we are accountable for our choices, actions, and our responses. But in doing so we must also hold fast to what is most true and most real. We are a part of the body of Christ. Therefore, *all* of the riches of Christ Jesus and all of the resources of Christ's body are ours and upon which we can draw. We are a part of Christ's body. When we suffer, Christ suffers, and his whole body suffers with us. We do not meet suffering alone. Our help is likewise not found within us, as individuals, but in Christ and Christ's body. Christ alone is able to sustain us through our suffering, because Christ alone has met and defeated all suffering, for all of creation, for all time.

Likewise, we must remember suffering is *not* what God intended! Therefore, we can weep, lament, mourn, cry out in anger and fear and frustration and doubt, *with Jesus*. And with Jesus we can proclaim, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:34; Mk 15:34).

What is most true and most real is our suffering, our story, is held within the much grander *Story* being authored by God. Because this is so are assured our suffering will not dictate our future, nor will it be all that comprises our story for God is not only the author of the *Story*, but our Creator and our Redeemer! The brokenness of this world, of

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<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-109.

us, will not always be. We are new creations no longer enslaved to the trajectory of suffering, which is death. Rather we are being prepared for new creation, where there will be no more tears, no more sorrow, disease, destruction or death. Likewise, because sin has been dealt with and its consequences utterly destroyed the Holy Spirit has made his home in us empowering us to know and trust and follow God, even now, even here amidst the deepest darkness of our suffering.

Similarly, we have been given access to all the riches of Christ, all the resources of Christ's body. We no longer need to be governed by a fear of scarcity when we face trials, nor of the need to hoard our resources in the face of another's need.<sup>210</sup> Nor do we need to concern ourselves with the source of the other's suffering, for just as Jesus does not turn anyone away from the cross, neither do we turn away from helping another in pain. We know we are unable to save ourselves and therefore unable to save anyone else. Free of this burden we can reach out to another in their suffering, regardless of why they are suffering because we know *God* will provide what they need and *God* will do what needs to be done. Our responsibility is to simply participate with God, as God's hands and feet for the other. In so doing we acknowledge the other as God's creation, made in God's image and declare him/her to have unsurpassable worth to God, a worth worthy of God's very life. So, in our caring for the other we are actually caring for Jesus.<sup>211</sup>

Because it is God's meta-narrative that is most true and most real we do not need to be afraid. God *is* greater than all of our suffering. We know this is so because Jesus entered into, and surpassed, the very depths and horror of all our agony, for all time,

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<sup>210</sup> Jonathan Wilson, *God's Good World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 18-19

<sup>211</sup> "...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40).

taking it all upon himself and dying as a result. But Jesus conquered and defeated death by rising from the grave, declaring that the outcome of our suffering is no longer death! And because he arose and lives, so too will we! Suffering and death are no longer our destination! They are no longer what define our lives! Indeed, this present suffering is not all that is happening.<sup>212</sup> God is working *in* us, and *for* us, and *with* us, and *through* us, to *bring* us, and all of creation into new creation. Our suffering will not end in death. Death is not the end of our story because death is not the end of *The Story*. The resurrected one, Jesus, he is the end.<sup>213</sup> He is our destination. Therefore, our response to suffering rests in who Jesus is, not in who we are.<sup>214</sup>

(ii) Uniqueness:

Each of us is God's unique creation. Each of us has been brought into being to reflect the diversity of who God is to the world, and to one another through our stewardship of our unique gifts, talents, and resources. Our uniqueness as individuals, along with all we have been given, is not intended solely for our own purposes.<sup>215</sup> They are a part of God's good gifts and God's provision for us, God's body, and for all of creation, that through them we, all of creation, might know God and God's great love for us.

Therefore, we must live lives that reflect the reality of both our ontology and teleology. We have been created in the image and likeness of God, as relational beings,

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<sup>212</sup> Nor, as Paul would say, is it worthy to be compared to the glory that awaits us (see Rom. 8:18). Which implies that regardless of how horrific our present may be, it will be eclipsed by the unimaginable great goodness of our future!

<sup>213</sup> Jonathan Wilson, *God's Good World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 135.

<sup>214</sup> Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Suffering and Pain* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2013), 124.

<sup>215</sup> See Ephesians 4:12 and 1 Cor. 14:12.

designed for relationship with God, one another, and all of creation. As creations, we are dependent upon our Creator and interdependent on each other.<sup>216</sup> All we are and all we have are *gifted* to us to provide not only for us, but also for the whole body and all of creation. In addition, all the resources of God are also ours in Christ, accessible to us as we have need of them. Therefore, there is no scarcity of resources with which to meet our needs or the needs of one another, but rather an abundant abundance! God has provided us with astonishingly *more* than we could ever ask or imagine! *This* is what is most real and most true.

(iii) Personal Agency:

God is indeed intimately at work in our lives because God created and loves us intimately. We have each been sought out like a prodigal son or daughter. But God's work in us is never intended to end with us; rather we have been adopted by God and brought into God's family, so *together* we comprise the body of Christ. This means the work being done in one part of the body is meant to bless and enable the healthy functioning of the whole. A hand on its own is indeed a marvel and a wonder, and perhaps there are things it could do alone. But attached to the rest of the body the hand is capable of not only utilizing all it has been designed to do, it facilitates the body in doing even greater things than it is capable of on its own.

In our suffering, we become profoundly aware of all we are not. Our strength, our faith, and our hope often flee. Consequently, it is here, perhaps more than at any other time we need to know and experience the work of God in one another's lives. We need the help God has provided for others through God's work in the body. We need our

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<sup>216</sup> See 1 Cor. 12:12-26.

brothers and sisters to “...(console) us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Cor. 1:4). What God does for one, God does for all.

(iv) Freedom

Yes, we have freedom to make choices about how we will respond to our suffering. But because we are God’s creation and a part of a body our freedom must always be exercised in light of the reality we are dependent and interdependent beings. Our lives are not our own, but neither is our suffering. Jesus suffers with us and when one part of the body suffers the whole body suffers. The gift of our freedom is meant to set us free *for* God and *for* one another and *for* life.<sup>217</sup> In Christ, we are no longer enslaved to the limitations of our darkened understanding and the selfish perimeters of our own desires, let alone the illusion there is ever any true freedom that is not connected to others. Our proper alignment with God is an alignment with life, with truth, and with one another. Apart from God we are left to scramble on our own to pull fragments of life together in order to create an identity and purpose for ourselves based on our choices, accomplishments, and resources without any foundation or anchoring that is deeper or a part from ourselves. We end up fragmented, always pulled in multiple directions in search of what will satisfy; alienated, because our ambitions will inevitably conflict with that of other people and lead us in perpetual competition to bend others to our purposes; alone, because we cannot trust anyone but ourselves; and anxious, because

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<sup>217</sup> James M. Houston, *The Creator: Living Well in God’s World* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 104.

we are utterly reliant on our own resources to provide, protect and produce all that we must have.<sup>218</sup>

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks:**

We cannot escape suffering any more than we can escape our culture. Nor do I believe it is God's intention we do. Though suffering was never God's intention for creation, in Jesus our Creator becomes our Redeemer, choosing to intimately engage both our suffering and our context. In Jesus, we see what life looks like when it is lived out of God's meta-narrative, out of what God says is *most true* and *most real* about life. In Jesus, we see what life looks like when it is lived under the influence of God's values instead of those our culture tries to impose on us. Because this is so, in Jesus we see how to meet the challenges of suffering *most faithfully*.<sup>219</sup>

We are not meant to be afraid, to recoil, to minimize, or to deny the reality of suffering. No. It is for the redemption of creation's suffering Jesus has come. As the body of Christ, we are to be as Jesus in the face of suffering. This is why I believe it is so critical for us to know *The Story* of which we are a part. Without knowing and experiencing *The Story* cognitively, sensually, imaginatively, physically, emotionally, socially, economically, historically, ethically, in each and every facet of our being we do not have the means of living or bearing witness to the way of life God always intended for us. Nor do we have the resources required to resist being shaped by our culture and its response to suffering.

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<sup>218</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion* (New York, NY: Image Books DoubleDay, 1983), 17-18.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

God did not create us with these manifold faculties by which to know and to experience him by accident. Therefore, all of these faculties must be fed, nurtured, formed, and informed by *The Story* if we are to properly and fully resource believers with the means of meeting the challenges of suffering faithful.

## CHAPTER SIX:

### Conclusion

Participation in this project has been a privilege, just as it has been to walk alongside other believers facing the challenges of suffering. The stories they have shared with me have facilitated and encouraged my own faith as I too confront suffering. In fact, part of the surprise that has emerged while accompanying others on this *Via Dolorosa* is the gifts they have imparted to me as they offer me glimpses of God's unique faithfulness in their lives. This is what Paul must have met when he wrote:

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ”. (2 Cor. 1:3-5)*

Though what I have encountered through their stories has inspired my faith, it has also deeply distressed me. It has not primarily been the sources of their suffering which have caused my distress, deeply troubling as they are. Rather, my distress has stemmed from learning these believers have not only endured their suffering in solitude, but have been forced to seek their primary assistance in navigating their circumstances from outside the church. Why would this be? Why would believers need to turn to a suffering world to find counsel, support, and consolation? Though I do not disparage the idea of anyone seeking help from those best qualified to provide it, I am troubled the very body who lives to bear witness to God's profound response to suffering and utter destruction of its source would have so little to offer people in pain. Should it not be us, followers of

the Suffering Servant, who are “best qualified” to walk with those who mourn, who are afraid, or who are without? Why then do the majority of our churches remain mute, absent, and seemingly incapacitated by the suffering of its people and the suffering of this world? <sup>220</sup> There is just something terribly wrong with this picture.

How then might the church once again begin to be a community unafraid of the challenges suffering presents? How might we become a community fully engaged in the world without falling victim to the world’s distorted narrative? How might we become a community who reflects the very presence of the Creator and Redeemer here on earth? What practices might facilitate this kind of life? What practices might enable us, as the body of Christ, to bear up under suffering with faith, hope, and love, thereby proclaiming the reality of the gospel’s good news to the world?

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## **I. Lament:**

I believe recovering the practice of communal lament is critical to our ability to bear our suffering in faith and in resistance to the misshaping powers of our culture. <sup>221</sup> To lament is to acknowledge before God, and one another, we are in pain and in need of God’s presence and intervention. Lament expresses our faith in the reality that God is personal and cares personally for us. Communal lament is a rebuttal of the idea we must manage our suffering alone, that we are self-sufficient. Instead as we lament together

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<sup>220</sup> Though there are individual churches that do actively seek to address both the suffering of their people, as well as that which they encounter in the world, they sadly seem to be the exception rather than rule.

<sup>221</sup> See Jonathan Wilson, *God’s Good World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2013), 222-224.

before God we proclaim our utter dependence on God, our Creator, and Redeemer and our interdependence on one another. Lamentation is a profound expression of our belief God is alive and active and pleased by the trust our unedited candor before him reveals, as it speaks of the intimacy our Father intends for us to have with him. (The psalter itself illustrates and provides us with living examples of God’s people engaging in this sort of intimacy: an intimacy that even invites our least ‘worthy’ prayers in the imprecatory psalms.<sup>222</sup>)

Lamentation boldly proclaims our trust in the reality that because God is the Truth, God is not afraid of the truth. God is therefore more than capable of handling the truth of our pain. We do not need to worry our honesty offends God. As Christine D. Pohl asserts, “...a community that is truthful will not necessarily be tidy. There will be loose threads and rough edges because members are unwilling to hide their problems or to cover their wounds lightly, saying “‘peace, peace’ where there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14).<sup>223</sup> In fact, the gospel proclaims God’s willingness to contend with the messiness, indeed the devastation of the truth. The gospel tells us Jesus entered into the very depths and horror of *all* of creation’s suffering, for *all* time, taking it *all* upon himself and dying because of it. Our Creator became part of his creation that he might suffer *with* us and *for* us in order that he might give life, his life, once again *to* us and all of creation. The gospel is in fact God’s public, and deeply personal, response to the truth, to the reality of what has happened to God’s creation when it chose to no longer be aligned with him.

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<sup>222</sup> Augustine believed the Psalter was provided as a pedagogy for our affections, realigning us with God. (See Brian Brock’s Incitement to Lament, in *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion*, ed. Brian Brock and Eva Harasta (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 183-203 for a richer account of Augustine’s reflections.)

<sup>223</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns Publishing Co.), 115.

Reality is what God deals in, never in allusions or false appearances, pretense or civility – always with what is real.<sup>224</sup> Through our lament, we merely stand in agreement with God that apart from him there is no life, only death, and so we, and all of creation, groan and grieve, and die as a result.

To lament is quite possibly one of the most powerful expressions of our faith as Christians. Lamentation is a proclamation reflective of God's own heart towards the source of our grief, for God grieves the suffering of creation. This was not what God intended for creation.

Secondly, to lament is to profess our belief that God invites us and welcomes us, regardless of our state. We are free to come to God in our humble brokenness, confessing our need of God, while simultaneously acknowledging we believe only God can save us, redeem our suffering, and bring us from death to life once again. We come to God with our lament because we believe God responds to us, that God our Creator is also the resurrected Word, and our Redeemer. Because this is so, we are assured our lament is never offered in vain.<sup>225</sup>

## **II. Sabbath:**

In response to so many of the primary values in our culture which insist we must relentlessly figure a way out of our suffering and pursue any means necessary to

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<sup>224</sup> In *Living into Community* Pohl discusses the needful place of truthfulness in the creation and nurture of healthy communities (see p. 111-155). I believe the practice of lament is part of what living truthfully is all about, as we choose to acknowledge our losses, sorrows, disappointments, failings, and failures before God. In doing so we resist denying, diminishing, being dishonest, and distorting the realities we face.

<sup>225</sup> For a fuller study of the necessity and history of lament amongst God's people, see Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore's work, *The Psalms as Christian Lament – A Historical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co.), 2014.

overcome our suffering, the gift of Sabbath provides healing balm. How desperately we need to rest and lean into what is most true and most real - that we are God's beloved creation and God has promised to provide all we need, even in the midst of our suffering, and for our whole life.<sup>226</sup> *God* will accomplish whatever it is *God* has given us to do in participation with *God's* good purposes for us, and all of creation. Practicing Sabbath reminds us it is up to God to sustain us and provide for us and to enable us to do all he has called us to do, together with him. The practice of Sabbath is a radical reorientation away from the prevailing messages fed to us by our culture. Our participation in Sabbath bears witness to our trust that it is God's grand narrative which tells us what is most true about who we are and for what purpose we have been created.<sup>227</sup>

### **III. Corporate Confession:**

I believe restoring the practice of corporate confession of our sin, followed by corporate absolution is also necessary for us to remember what is true and real about us – that though we are unique, beloved creations of God we are sinners in need of salvation. Confession is our agreement with God apart from Christ's life, death, and resurrection we are slaves to sin and its trajectory of death.

Confession of our sin also helps us to remain alert to the constant pressure our culture puts on us to erect idols, to seek life from sources other than God. For when we are in pain it is the direction we turn to for solace, assurance, and hope that speaks most

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<sup>226</sup> James M. Houston, *The Creator*, p.236-238.

<sup>227</sup> See Jonathan Wilson, *God's Good World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 252-253.

loudly about who, or in what, our faith truly resides. And my guess is the sources many of us turn to are not the ones we profess to believe, yet this is what is laid bare when we are in the midst of great suffering.<sup>228</sup> In a sense, suffering can be the great discloser of our deepest beliefs, and our hidden idols, can confession our means of resistance their seductive allure.<sup>229</sup>

#### **IV. Making Choices:**

Perhaps the best way for us to resist our culture's misshapen understanding of what it means for us to have freedom of choice might be the practice of discovering from where and from whom our material goods come. Who are the chain of people and what events are involved in providing our food, clothing, sports equipment, or any other sundry material goods we seek for 'the best price' on a regular basis? This may seem a rather odd idea to include as a practice or a discipline of faith, but I believe the distance between us and the source of the goods we use on a regular basis keeps us ignorant of who is truly bearing the cost of our 'cheap' goods and services.<sup>230</sup> Likewise, our willingness to remain ignorant of the interconnectivity of our global marketplace simply allows us to live in such a way that negates the consequences and the impact that our freedom to choose has on many other people.<sup>231</sup> We must begin to honestly confront the

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<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 247-248.

<sup>229</sup> This should give us even more cause to resist the temptation to dismiss, minimize, or ignore suffering in our congregations, as it can alert us to the 'yeast' in our midst.

<sup>230</sup> Daniel M. Bell Jr., *The Economy of Desire*, James K. A. Smith, series ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2012), 55-57.

<sup>231</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 39-43.

truth that our freedom always comes at the cost of someone else's freedom, and if all of us do not have the freedom to choose, do any of us? <sup>232</sup>

This, of course, points to the reality none of us are really free apart from being set free in Christ. Maybe the best way to remember, or practice the reality of what it means to be enslaved to sin, and therefore the value of Christ gift to us, is to regularly serve those whose lives can no longer hide the effects of this slavery – prisoners, addicts, or prostitutes for starters. Service of this nature is meant to have us consistently choose to relinquish some of our freedom *for* the other, to lay down what we have – maybe it is our time, our goals, our leisure, or simply our attention – in order to be *with* the other. The beauty of such a practice is that it typically ends up touching the lives of both the giver and the receiver, so eventually it is difficult to determine which is which. This is what Christian communion (*'com'*, the Latin root for 'with', and union) is about, literally 'being together' with one another and just as the Father is with the Son who is with the Holy Spirit in mutual giving and receiving from one another.

## **V. Conclusion:**

The church has been infected by the predominant values of our culture, which have distorted our understanding of the nature and causes of suffering. This infection is reflected in the church tending to favour, and therefore focus on, aspects of Jesus' character and call that do not take us, or encourage us, to go to the places Jesus went –

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<sup>232</sup> Daniel M. Bell Jr., *The Economy of Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2012), 99.

to the darker, dirtier, more dangerous, and broken places in both ourselves and in the world.<sup>233</sup>

Sadly, the church also tends to view suffering, as our culture does, through the lens of capitalism, seeing suffering as a marketable commodity that can be cast off and/or replaced.<sup>234</sup> Capitalism seems to have lulled the western church into a silent complicity about the actual cost of our lifestyle, not only for those in the majority world who suffer to provide it, but by creation which has been dying to sustain it. We have likewise been reluctant to challenge, or even question, the reality that what profits us here in the west tends to create profound suffering in other parts of the globe. This economic apathy towards the suffering of others then continues to spread into other aspects of our lives. As Bauman notes, "...human solidarity is the first casualty of the triumphs of the consumer market".<sup>235</sup>

The preferred pedagogical approach of contemporary evangelical culture does not help suffering believers much either, as propositional, disembodied truths are cold comfort to a grieving divorcé, a parent whose child is in jail, or the elderly suffering with cancer. But perhaps this is part of suffering's paradoxical gifts to the church, in that its challenges not only force us to be 're-embodied', but begs the question, "where is the *body of Christ* when I am suffering?" If one member suffers, do not all members suffer?

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<sup>233</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 8.

<sup>234</sup> Dorothy Soelle, *Suffering*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Books, 1975), 104.

<sup>235</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 76.

(I Cor. 12:26) Or has the influence of a culture that worships independence and individualism ‘dis-embodied’ the very body of Christ? <sup>236</sup>

The stakes to change this situation in the church are high, for I fear with Dorothy Soelle that “Christianity has become a stranger to pain”. <sup>237</sup> This cannot be, for the “...consequence of apathy is the desensitization that freedom from suffering involves, the inability to perceive reality”. <sup>238</sup> For if God’s people become strangers to pain and are no longer able to perceive its wicked presence nor actively engaged in its destruction, who will? Jacques Leclercq states explicitly: “The problem of suffering is above all a Christian one. Apart from Christianity, suffering is absurd, purely and simply bad; and must be eliminated without delay”. <sup>239</sup> Suffering makes no sense apart from the cross; there is no coherence to life, to love, or to beauty without the gospel. This then is our calling - to be a cruciform people shaped (formed), inhabited, and empowered by the Spirit of the Suffering Servant, “...to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour...to comfort all who mourn...” (Isa. 61:1-2). It is this continual movement of God, *towards* and *into* the suffering of creation, for the sake of its salvation and redemption, which must characterize God’s people.

But where do we begin? I believe this project offers three suggestions. First, we need to seek God’s counter cultural understanding *of* suffering because it is God who

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<sup>236</sup> Might suffering’s tendency to express itself bodily be part of the source of our discomfort with it? Is this not yet another symptom of what Jonathan Wilson refers to as the church’s “low-grade gnostic infection”? (See Wilson, *God’s Good World*, p. 5-6).

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>239</sup> Jacques Leclercq, *Approaches to the Cross* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963), p 42.

uniquely empowers us to participate with God's equally counter cultural response *to* suffering.

Second, because suffering is essential to both the person and purposes of Jesus, suffering must then play an essential role in how we to form people into followers of Jesus. Just as the form of a human gene is intimately related to its function/malfunction in the human body, so how we are formed/malformed in Christ will determine the health and functioning of Christ's body.

The third suggestion will require the church's willingness to enter into suffering. If what we do determines who we become, then forming believers in the ways of Christ will lead the church into a way of life amongst and for the very least of these. This way of life will require the church to face the same rejection, betrayal, and misunderstanding Jesus faced. It is a way of life that leads to the cross and a putting to death of all that would seek to rob us, and all of creation, from life. But as we are formed, so shall we be.

We need not be afraid of suffering. Jesus promised us, "...in this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33). *This* is what is most true and most real. *This* is the Good News.

*(Appendix 1- Letter of Participation)*

February 15, 2016.

Dear Participant,

I am writing to you in order to ask if you would be interested in helping me with a research project I am about to begin as the final requirement for my degree.

This project is an extension of my concern regarding the general lack of preparation we, as contemporary Evangelical believers, have had in order to faithfully meet the challenges of suffering.

The intent of the project is to introduce a small group of believers, drawn from female acquaintances who are suffering, to two practices of faith through which they might encounter God and thereby be strengthened in their faith and better prepared to meet suffering's challenges. The first involves sharing the story of your suffering and the second is listening prayer called the *Examen*. (I have enclosed a brief description of this practice of prayer, as I appreciate it may be new to you.)

This project will run for eight weeks. It will involve agreeing to meet with me twice on an individual basis, both times to share the narrative of your suffering. The two meetings will be separated by six weeks, during which time I will lead participants altogether through the practice of the *Examen*. The group will meet for approximately 1.5 hours/week at my home. My hope is that in providing an opportunity for participants to share their stories and then listen to God's Spirit reveal where God has been and continues to be amidst these stories, participants will be enabled to re-narrate their stories with a fresh awareness of God's agency and presence in their lives.

All the data I acquire from this project will remain anonymous and be *solely* used for the purposes of my research project. If you are willing to participate I will need your signature at the bottom of this letter. If you have any questions at all, please call me at (403) 869-2687. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Ann Thakkar

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## (Appendix 2)

### The Examen

Saint Ignatius, a priest and theologian in the fifteenth century and founder of the Jesuits, created the Ignatian Examen. Ignatius believed God was active and present in the world and careful, consistent engagement with God was the only way to devote oneself to Jesus.

There is something unique about the Examen as it teaches us to take into account more than our sins and need of confession. The Examen teaches us also to consider and be mindful of the *good* works and *loving* responses we have shown to Jesus and to others throughout our day. Ignatius believed God cares as much about what we have done *right* as what we have done wrong. So the Ignatian Examen is an invitation to hear as much about the *love of God* as the judgment of God.

The Examen is ultimately a practice of discernment, as the writer of 1 John cautions us: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God... (1 John 4:1).”

While discernment is a process intended to assist us in evaluating the world around us, discernment must first begin with ourselves. The Examen helps us to learn how to determine which voices we are paying attention to. Is it the world’s voice; our own; the voice of those who have harmed us in the past; or is it God’s voice that we are hearing?

Discernment is a lifelong process, just as it is a lifelong process to grow in the likeness of Jesus.

The Examen helps us to be aware of the whole of ourselves and of God’s presence and activity in and through us each and every day.

The practice of the Ignatian Examen is just that — practice. Through it we are learning to cultivate our engagement with the Holy Spirit in a way that may be quite familiar or may be quite new. Practicing helps us learn the rhythms of discernment, the voice of God over the voice of ourselves and helps us to identify our own impulses, both good and not so good. Ignatius followed a format, which I have adapted here for our use. The practice can take longer if desired, but it can take as little as fifteen minutes each day. It is a practice that can be done alone or with others.

#### **First**

Recognize you are in the presence of God. Get still. Quiet your thoughts. Take a few deep breaths. Perhaps you should close your eyes or perhaps you should leave them open. Do what you need to do to feel alert but at ease. Be aware of the Holy Spirit within you, and pray that the Spirit would guide your questions, your evaluations, and

your examination. Spend a few moments praying for clarity and *charity* toward yourself and others. Return to your stillness, recognizing God's presence.

### **Second**

Begin to think back on your day. At first, do not linger over anything. Simply consider the day as it is — who you met, where you went, what you felt, what you said. Consider how you spent your time, whether you ever felt flustered or peaceful. Let the day's rhythm become clear to you. Begin to thank God for the moments that were particularly enjoyable. It may take a moment to think of one or something may seem too small, but offer it back to God with thanksgiving all the same.

### **Third**

Now consider the day through careful discernment. During this day, what did you do that caused you to feel or to be far from God? What did you do that you wish you had not done? What did you do that may have been sin? Take a moment to carefully evaluate what comes to mind. Ask the Holy Spirit if you have seen these things rightly. Have you assumed something was a sin that was only an accident? Have you ignored a sin and pretended it was only a mistake? As each comes to mind and each is evaluated, respond appropriately. To what was sinful, ask the forgiveness of God, and then release it to God. If there is peace to be made with your neighbor, rest in the knowledge that you will make it when you have the next opportunity. To what was only mistake, not sin, but may have been a source of shame or despair, thank the Spirit for helping you discern the difference and then ask for the healing that only the Spirit can bring. After each confession and each request for healing, imagine the thing being taken from you, released from you, and given back to God for God to worry about.

### **Fourth**

Now be mindful of what you did well. What moments made you feel close to Jesus? What moments most reflect to you the will of God being worked out in your life? Ask the Spirit if there was something ordinary in your day that has more significance than you first understood. Linger over the ways in which, small or large, you showed love to God, to God's world, to God's people. Thank God for God's partnership with you in this life, for the ways in which you come to know God more and more each day. Ask for God's continued guidance and to know God's love for you. Then, as before, allow these thoughts to loosen from you. Give the good work back to God as well.

### **Fifth**

Ask the Holy Spirit to give you peace about the day and if there is anything in particular that the Spirit wants you to pay attention to from it. If something arises, dwell on it for a moment. Ask God what God desires you to see. Perhaps it is only to be mindful of it. Perhaps there is something you are to do. Pause over the thought until nothing new comes to mind, then give this too back to God. Ask the Spirit to return you to the place of peace.

### **Sixth**

Take a moment to think about the next day. Are there challenges ahead? Is it full of excitement? The unknown? Nothing out of the ordinary? Thank God for bringing you through this day and seeing you into the next. Ask God for God's help in being attentive to yourself and the world around you as you go through tomorrow, thank God for God's help, and then offer this too back to God. End your prayer in a state of peace and, if you're inclined, an aloud, exhaled *amen*.

Practicing the Ignatian Examen for the first time or practicing it for the fiftieth is a lot like learning to tie our shoes. Distraction, uncertainty, arrogance, misplaced criticism, frustration all come out in forces of varying degrees as you and the Holy Spirit try to make sense of your soul. At times, you'll find yourself wondering about that box left unchecked on your to-do list or whether your best friend is angry with you. The mind, when given liberty to be still for a bit too long, has a tendency to bring up all kinds of shadowed doubts and terrors. Some days, these will be easy to expel and other days they will feel crippling.

Lean into the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit, ultimately, who is the revealer and intercessor in this practice. Reach out to the Spirit for your help. The Spirit is your rootedness and your center. When you find, thoughts straying, name them before God. "God, I'm distracted." And then wait to see if your mind settles back. If it doesn't, take a moment to pay attention to what won't leave you alone. A friend has come to mind that you don't often think of. Their appearance in your mind's eye is persistent. Turn this over to God. Confess that you don't know why this person has been brought to mind. Take some time to pray for them. Pray blessing over them. Unless they have told you of a specific circumstance, do not pray beyond their well-being, their joy in the Lord, and God's favor to be upon them. Pray in this way until your prayers feel complete and you find yourself once again in a place of stillness. Offer this moment once more back to God and then begin right where you left off in the process of the Examen.

It's clumsy work, but we are clumsy beings. Knowing ourselves is a profound declaration of trust. Trust not only in our own ability to contend with our souls and bodies but also in God's willingness to reveal us to ourselves, caught up in the very life of God. Not just once, but over and over.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> I have adapted this brief description from an excerpt by Preston Yancey from his book *Out of the House of Bread: Satisfying Your Hunger for God with the Spiritual Disciplines*. The excerpt can be found at <http://media.harpercollinschristian.com/page/why-you-should-con> Accessed Feb. 15, 2016.

(Appendix 3)

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions - Telling the Story of Suffering:**

*These questions are merely intended to assist you in sharing your story. They are not intended to limit what you would like to share, nor elicit details you would prefer to exclude.*

1. Tell me a little bit about your story. Who are the main ‘characters’ and events in your story?
2. As you think back over your life where has suffering touched you?
3. In what ways do you think this experience(s) of suffering has affected/shaped you?
4. In what ways do you think suffering has informed how you think about yourself? How do you think it has affected the way you engage with others?
5. How have you experienced God in the midst of your suffering, or not?
6. How do you think your suffering has affected the way you think, feel, and relate to God?
7. How do you think suffering has affected your expectations of life, your hopes and dreams?
8. In what way do you think your faith has made your experience(s) of suffering more/less bearable?
9. What practices do you feel have encouraged/facilitated your faith amidst suffering? How?
10. What (or who) else do you feel has encouraged/facilitated your faith? How?
11. Are there any other aspects of your story you believe have affected the way in which you have dealt with your suffering?

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