

## Empty out your Teacup God

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.*

Lao Tsu  
from *Tao Te Ching*

This last chapter is by way of being a 'credo'. It is an account of the God whom I meet in my life of 'sharing the darkness' and of how I personally have made sense of the world in which I live.

The Indian Jesuit psychologist Tony de Mello is quoted as saying 'Empty out your teacup God' – a marvellous, withering and twentieth-century way of telling us that our God is too small. A few years ago I would have thought that a professional carer's God-concept was his own private business: but the longer I work in the field of caring, the more important it seems that we do not get hung up on false Gods, however comforting. It matters for three reasons. Firstly, as I have tried to show, we will damage those we care for if we are purveyors of a theology in which illness is seen as a punishment for sins or physical healing is declared freely available to those with sufficient faith.

Secondly, we ourselves will come unstuck if we search for facile explanations of the mystery of suffering instead of bowing down in baffled awe before the one, holy, unknowable God.

Thirdly, as adult human beings, we have no business clinging to childhood beliefs when we should be letting go in faith to follow the truth. Our hearts are for filling, our minds are for blowing, and our idols for shattering into a thousand pieces. In her book *Holy the Firm*, Annie Dillard struggles to wrest a meaning from the tragic accident of a young girl burnt in a plane crash:

Today is Friday, November 20th. Julie Norwich is in the hospital, burned; we can get no word of her condition. People released from burn wards, I once read, have a very high suicide rate. They had not realised, before they were burnt, that life could include suffering or that they personally could be permitted such pain . . .

In Chapter 9, I quoted Annie Dillard's reaction to the story of Christ's encounter with the man born blind. The disciples, ever curious, asked Jesus why the man should have been thus afflicted. Was it, they said, his fault or his parents'? Jesus' reply, 'meagre, baffling, and infuriating', was that 'the works of God should be made manifest'. Dillard reacts in a fury:

The works of God made manifest? Do we really need more victims to remind us that we're all victims? Is this some sort of a parade for which a conquering army shines up its terrible guns and rolls them up and down the street for the people to see? Do we need blind men stumbling about, and little flame faced children, to remind us what God can – and will – do? (ibid.)

I find this angry questioning marvellous for it throws piety and pussyfooting to the wind and asks the questions we all long to ask. Why did God permit the earthquake in Guatemala or Mexico? Why must Derek die of cancer, when he is so young, so good, so loved by his wife and children? And what of the thirty-two year old girl whose body I saw last time I went to the undertakers – flown in from Germany where she'd taken her own life in a fit of depression? Why, why? Oh, God why? What the hell is going on here?

Again rises from the heart of suffering the ancient cry,  
O God, why? O God, how long?  
And the cry is met with silence.

Jim Cotter  
*Healing More or Less*

I like, too, Annie Dillard's answers though I do not claim that they are true. How can I know, how can she? All I know is that they satisfy some of my intellectual yearnings for answers to impossible questions.

Do we need little flame faced children to remind us what God can – and will – do? Yes, in fact, we do. We do need

reminding, not of what God can do, but of what he cannot do, or will not, which is to catch time in its free fall and stick a nickel's worth of sense into our days. And we need reminding of what time can do, must only do; churn out enormity at random, and beat it, with God's blessing, into our heads: that we are *created*, sojourners in a land we did not make, a land with no meaning of itself and no meaning we can make for it alone. Who are we to demand explanations of God? (And what monsters of perfection would we be if we did not?) We forget ourselves, picknicking; we forget where we are. There is no such thing as a freak accident. 'God is at home,' says Meister Eckhart. 'We are in the far country.' (*Holy the Firm*)

I find this concept of forgetting ourselves picknicking very powerful. When we are well and successful we do indeed lose sight of who and where we are. We build our hospitals, play with our computers, travel to the moon in rockets and fancy ourselves as lords of the earth. And then, if we are lucky, we have the mat pulled out from under our feet by an earthquake, a tornado, or by illness and we rediscover ourselves as creatures.

Dillard's language is not easy to understand, but perhaps it is hardly surprising for she is struggling to talk about the unknowable God, the God that we are always trying to tame, to tie down, and to manipulate to do what we want. Sometimes it is difficult to realise that we are talking about the same God. Is this God of the mystics' 'dazzling dark', the same Jesus that we beg to heal our wounds, the same God that I invoke to start my recalcitrant car on a cold morning? Of course it is, for there is only one God. It is *we* who need to understand him this way and that, to call him Jesus, Lord, Abba, Father, El Shaddai, Yahweh. Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and so on: we each have our different needs – to light candles, to strew flowers, to offer sweetmeats. And that is OK, for that is the way God made us. All he asks is that we worship him as best we can and that we do not delude ourselves into thinking that we can contain or manipulate him. Having emptied out our teacup God, we find him everywhere and meet him face to face in the scriptures of those we used to think of as heathen:

There is no God but He, the  
Living, the Everlasting.

Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep;  
to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth.  
Who is there that shall intercede with him  
save by his leave?  
He knows what lies before them  
and what is after them,  
and they comprehend not anything of His  
knowledge save such as He wills.  
His throne comprises the heavens and the earth;  
the preserving of them oppresses Him not.  
He is the All-high, the All-glorious.

*The Koran, Sura 2.255*

But although we 'comprehend not anything of His' we are born to try. It is in our nature to struggle to understand the ways of God, to argue with him like Job, until we are reduced again to silence. Each of us, therefore, must follow our own lines of questioning, searching, piecing together the evidence, striving to penetrate the mystery. It so happens that I find myself most at home with the writings of the mystics. Others may not find them helpful. Like Annie Dillard, I am drawn to Meister Eckhart's vision of the God who strips us of our support system so that we may be freed for him. To others this kind of God talk is unacceptable. But before we dismiss each other's theology we must remember that we are all searching, playing with ideas, struggling with the unseen God. The following passage from Eckhart makes more sense to me than anything else I have read about suffering:

The faithful God often lets his friends fall sick and lets every prop on which they lean be knocked out from under them. It is a great joy to loving people to be able to do important things such as watching, fasting, and the like, besides sundry more difficult undertakings. In such things they find their joy, and their stay and hope. Thus their pious works are supports, stays, or footings to them. Our Lord wants to take these things all away, for he would like to be their only stay. He does this because of his simple goodness and mercy. He wants nothing more than his own goodness. He will not be influenced in the least to give or do by any act of ours. Our Lord wants his friends to be rid of such notions. That is why he removes every prop, so that he alone may support them. It is his will to give greatly, but only because of his own free goodness, so that

he shall be their support and they, finding themselves to be nothing at all, may know how great the generosity of God is. For the more helpless and destitute the mind that turns to God for support can be, the deeper the person penetrates God and the more sensitive he is to God's most valuable gifts. Man must build on God alone. (*Talks of Instruction*, no. 10)

Eckhart clearly believes in a God who permits suffering – rather on the Job model. At first sight this seems an outrageous idea. How can we believe in a loving God who allows good people to get cancer or other unpleasant diseases? And yet, if we think it through, how can we *not* believe it? Good people clearly do suffer persecution, accidents and illness. So what is going on? It seems to me there are four possibilities. The first is that we are all deluding ourselves and that there is no God at all: things just happen in a random sort of way. The second possibility is that God is not able to control the forces of nature or evil and is powerless to stop things happening. That way he could be like us: good and loving but powerless to stop the avalanche or the tornado. The third is that he is quite capable of preventing something happening but does not choose to intervene. He sees the dictator take power, the political prisoners arrested and tortured, but does not move to stay the executioner's hand. The American Jesuit poet Dan Berrigan captures the anguished cry of those who see evil triumph, their prayers for deliverance apparently ignored:

I see the wicked glide by  
sleek in their velvet hearses  
rich beyond measure, egos  
puffed like adders.

No sons of misfortune these:  
no cares shadow the perfumed brows;  
a whirling of furies  
their axle tree cuts;  
the innocent die.

I sweat like a beast  
for the fate of my people.  
Is God  
ignorant, blank eyed,

deaf, far distant,  
bought off, grown old? . . .

Why then endure  
why thirst for justice?  
Your kingdom-come  
a mirage, never comes.

I sweat like a beast  
my nightmare is life long  
And where in the world  
are you?

Daniel Berrigan  
*Psalm 73, Uncommon Prayer*

The fourth possibility is that God is somehow *involved* in every person's life and actually *arranges* that some people suffer more than others because it is part of his great cosmic plan.

I cannot say I find any one of these four options easily acceptable but I would tend towards the fourth: a belief in a God who both permits suffering and is somehow deeply involved in his creation and his creatures, although we are at a loss to understand his ways. My own experience of personal suffering and many years of working for the oppressed and the dying has left me knowing less but believing more. This then is my 'credo':

I believe that God  
has the whole world  
in his hands.

He is not a bystander  
at the pain of the world.  
He does not stand  
like Peter,  
wringing his hands  
in the shadows,  
but is there,  
in the dock,  
on the rack,  
high on the gallows tree.

He is *in* the pain  
of the lunatic,  
the tortured.

those wracked by grief.  
*His* is the blood  
that flows in the gutter,  
*His* are the veins burned by heroin,  
his the lungs choked by AIDS.  
His is the heart  
broken by suffering,  
his the despair  
of the mute,  
the oppressed,  
the man with the gun to his head.

He is the God of Paradox.

In the last piece of spaced out prose (I do not pretend that it is poetry!) I have tried to capture two of the most mysterious elements of our Christian faith: that God is the all powerful creator of this world and at the same time he suffers impotently at the heart of it. And as if that was not hard enough to take on board, we believe that this same God who allows/permits/connives at/causes suffering, is all loving and all caring. He is the God who told us not to worry because we are 'worth more than many sparrows' and yet sits silently by while children starve to death and pregnant women are raped and bayoneted to death. Well may the poet cry, 'And where in the world are you?' (Berrigan).

I would like to leave the 'why me' question there, for I have no answer to it. Let it remain like a friendly punchbag hanging in the corner of the screaming room, upon which we can vent our rage and sadness, our questions and our impotence. Let us turn now to an equally mysterious and fascinating aspect of Christian doctrine, the concept of redemptive suffering.

This doctrine is very important to me personally – I believe it passionately and it sustains me in my daily contact with the dying and in my consciousness of the hungry and the oppressed. Once again, however, it plunges me into the mystery of the God of paradox for I must hold in some sort of creative tension two apparently contradictory beliefs: that I am called to continue Christ's ministry of healing, to pour myself out for the hungry and the desolate, the sick and the oppressed, AND that all this unmerited suffering which I am struggling to prevent and alleviate is redeeming the world.

Mercifully, as it happens, I *don't* have any problems reconciling these two beliefs for I have long since learned to be comfortable with mystery. Perhaps it is just the type of person I am, or perhaps it is that I find the two ideas so abundantly clear that I do not find it necessary to worry about it. It is, however, a quantum leap from the idea that *Jesus* by suffering redeemed the world to the notion that *all* unwanted suffering is redemptive, so I will try to explain how I arrived at this conviction.

As Christians, we are familiar with the idea that Christ died for our sins, and for some people the details of the death of the historical Jesus is integral to their devotion. As a Catholic child I was brought up to meditate upon the Stations of the Cross – the milestones of Jesus' journey from Pilate's court to Calvary, but I no longer find this type of devotion helpful. Perhaps my enforced familiarity with the suffering of men and women of our own time has made the dwelling upon the re-enactment of the crucifixion seem stylised and sentimental. I find it hard to weep about the crowning of thorns when I think about modern day torture centres in Latin America. Frankly, I find myself unable to meditate upon either – it sickens me. Of much greater interest to me than the details of Jesus' torture and death is the theology *behind* it. For that we need to turn to Isaiah, to what is known as the 'Song of the Servant'.

The 'Suffering Servant of Yahweh' is a mysterious figure in Isaiah, 'a man of suffering and acquainted with grief', who somehow *by his suffering*, takes upon himself the sins of the people. The Servant is, moreover, a man singled out for this task. It is not that ill fortune has overcome him by chance, but rather that he has been chosen for this task from the womb. In Isaiah 42, in the first of the four songs, the prophet declares that Yahweh called him by name before he was born, singled him out to serve in the cause of right. He was moulded and formed for his task and then appointed as a leader, given his mandate to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison and those who live in the darkness from the dungeon.

That Jesus identified himself with the prophet is clear, for he used a parallel text from Isaiah when he began his preaching ministry in the temple making his own the call to

bring good news to the poor, freedom to captives, and sight to the blind.

It is however quite uncanny the way the events preceding the crucifixion are mirrored in the Song of the Servant:

For my part, I made no resistance,  
neither did I turn away.  
I offered my back to those who struck me,  
my cheeks to those who tore at my beard;  
I did not cover my face  
against insult and spittle.

Isa. 50:5-6

It is in the fourth song, however, that the concept of redemptive suffering is spelt out:

As the crowds were appalled on seeing him  
– so disfigured did he look  
that he seemed no longer human –  
so will the crowds be astonished at him,  
and kings stand speechless before him;  
for they shall see something never told  
and witness something never heard before:  
'Who could believe what we have heard,  
and to whom has the power of Yahweh been revealed?'  
Like a sapling he grew up in front of us,  
like a root in arid ground.  
Without beauty, without majesty (we saw him),  
no looks to attract our eyes;  
a thing despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering,  
a man to make people screen their faces;  
he was despised and we took no account of him.

And yet ours were the sufferings he bore,  
ours the sorrows he carried.  
But we, we thought of him as someone punished,  
struck by God, and brought low.  
Yet he was pierced through our faults,  
crushed for our sins.  
On him lies a punishment that brings us peace,  
and through his wounds we are healed.

Isa. 52:13-53:5

This passage came alive for me in a singularly poignant way a few weeks ago when I read from it to comfort a man who was sobbing in despair at the uselessness of his suffering. He had a cancer in his mouth which had destroyed his tongue so that he could barely speak and it was now invading his face. At that moment he was for me the man so disfigured he was no longer human, the man to make people screen their faces.

I first became interested in the Song of the Servant and its message when I was at Ampleforth Abbey, living as a sort of monk *manqué*, attending the Divine Office and dabbling a little in scripture and theology. I was struck particularly by the terrifying description of the man of sorrows, a creature disfigured, without beauty, 'a man to make people screen their faces'. This image, so familiar, made me think not of Jesus and his crucifixion but of the people of South America and in particular of the people that I left behind in the torture centres and the concentration camps in Chile. Not that I personally saw people who had been mutilated – the authorities were too careful for that. Those who had been badly hurt were isolated until their wounds healed or sometimes they just disappeared. But I knew from my own experience of torture and from the accounts of my companions that the brutalised are not a pretty sight. Could it be, I wondered, that these people too, the men hung naked and upside down on the 'pau de arara' or the women raped and violated by dogs were somehow atoning for the sins of their captors?

At first it seems preposterous to think of Chilean Marxists bearing the sins of the CIA upon their bruised and blood-stained shoulders. But why not? Is not the 'parilla' the twentieth-century equivalent of the cross, the throwing of a man bound with barbed wire to his death from a helicopter, the counterpart of crucifixion? The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that if Jesus' suffering was redemptive, so too was the suffering of those who had laid down their lives for their friends.

If this seems an absurd bending of the scriptures to political ends, let me hasten to quote St Paul in my defence: 'It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the church' (Col. 1:24). Perhaps then we can see Christ's redemptive act

as an ongoing drama in which we are all players. The question which I ask myself as I write is this: can we see *all* unmerited suffering as redemptive? Or is its redemptive power contingent upon the sufferer's mental attitude? One thinks of examples of the heroic fortitude of people like Thérèse of Lisieux, offering her suffering from terminal tuberculosis to God. Much nearer home, I recall a young Catholic woman dying of cancer who asked me one day, 'How can I *use* my suffering for others?' It is hard to imagine that such an offering is rejected; the pain of these women must somehow be taken up like a holocaust and used we know not how.

Moving just a step laterally from these people who *offer* their pain for others, I think of all the good Christian people whose theology does not encompass this kind of prayer or language. They suffer bravely, loving and giving to the end. What happens to *their* gift? Surely it must go, albeit unlabelled, to the same heavenly sorting office? But what of the atheist? I think in particular of Margaret, a woman I mentioned earlier on. An unbeliever, she radiated the sort of serenity and generosity one expects of saints and died a magnificent selfless death, her life poured out daily for what?

From there, of course, we move naturally to those men and women who somehow never receive the grace to accept their suffering and die a sad inward-looking and frankly selfish death. We see these people at the hospice from time to time: men and women whose horizons are shrunk by suffering and who will call out to have their pillows straightened when they can see the nurses attending to someone in pain, right in the next bed. These are the poorest of my people, and it is hard to love them. Is their suffering worthless in the divine strategy? I doubt it. How can it be, for people's psychological and emotional well-being is not a clear-cut issue of heroism and sin. We all have different gifts and different weaknesses. Some are conditioned by a loveless childhood to fight their own corner and cannot take on board the needs of others.

Lastly, of course, there are those who, in purely human terms get what is coming to them. What price the murderer's agony as he awaits execution or the pain of the child molester as he is beaten, cringing, to a pulp by the other prisoners? Or the terrorist felled by the bullets of police or rival factions? They surely must fall unnoticed into the pit whence they came. But do they? I doubt it.

If I can forgive my torturers, if Gordon Wilson can forgive the terrorists who killed his daughter, what much greater loving space must we imagine in the heart of our all seeing, all loving God. The lines that follow are a continuation of my own particular 'credo', the beliefs that have crystallised during the past few years, when exposure to suffering has become an everyday experience, a part of life:

I believe,  
 no pain is lost.  
 No tear unmarked,  
 no cry of anguish  
 dies unheard,  
 lost in the hail of gunfire  
 or blanked out by the padded cell.  
 I believe that pain  
 and prayer  
 are somehow saved,  
 processed,  
 stored,  
 used in the Divine Economy.  
 The blood  
 shed in Salvador  
 will irrigate the heart  
 of some financier  
 a million miles away.  
 The terror,  
 pain,  
 despair,  
 swamped  
 by lava, flood or earthquake  
 will be caught up  
 like mist and fall again,  
 a gentle rain  
 on arid hearts  
 or souls despairing  
 in the back streets  
 of Brooklyn.

No doubt when I talk like this, *my* God is too small. Of course he is. How can we know what God is about – or even if there is a God? We can only struggle with the facts as we see them, ponder them deep in our hearts and extrapolate from our

own experience. And when we have done that, we can only say, 'This is what makes sense to me. This is how I think it works.' The great joke, of course, is that the more we believe, the less we know. I cannot put it better than Fyn's Anna:

When you're little you 'understand' Mister God. He sits up there on his throne, a golden one of course; he has got whiskers and crown and everyone is singing hymns like mad to him. God is useful and usable. You can ask him for things, he can strike your enemies deader than a door-nail and he is pretty good at putting hexes on the bully next door, like warts and things. Mister God is so 'understandable', so useful and so usable, he is like some object, perhaps the most important object of all, but nevertheless an object, and absolutely understandable. Later on you 'understand' him to be a bit different but you are still able to grasp what he is. Even though you 'understand' him, he doesn't seem to understand you! He doesn't seem to understand that you simply must have a new bike, but your 'understanding' of him changes a bit more. In whatever way or state you understand Mister God, so you diminish his size. He becomes an understandable entity among other understandable entities. So Mister God keeps on shedding bits all the way through your life until the time comes you admit freely and honestly that you don't understand Mister God at all. At this point you have let Mister God be his proper size and wham, there he is laughing at you. (*Mr God, This is Anna*)

stráct

zvik a heder  
vetru

napřeknutí

Perhaps Anna, the down to earth child who walked and talked with Mr God and died a messy death impaled upon a fence post is a model for us all. We too must be Easter people, deeply rooted in the world and its pain but holding always within the same focus the God who made us and who alone makes sense of our living and our dying.

At first this seems a tall order, but we forget: Easter people grow up to become the children of Pentecost. Right at the heart of the mystery of suffering is the grace that sustains us all, carers and cared for alike. It comes as freely and as surely as the sunrise, piercing the blackness of grief and despair, restoring once again the hope of things unseen.