Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of Illness

Dealing with Sickness, Loss, Dying, and Death

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6

Illness and the Paradox of Power

A Spirituality of Mortality

Kieran Scott

We need an approach to loss, illness, and death that is both religious and educational. This essay will address the first part of that duality. Such an approach, I propose, has to come to grips with the dynamics of human power. Power, then, is the hermeneutical lens through which I will view the issues of loss, illness, and death. At the outset, let me say, what is true for the individual in this regard is true for the nation.

In a letter to the *New York Times*, Tom F. Driver, professor emeritus at Union Theological Seminary, wrote:

> "For a very brief time after 9/11 we North Americans had a chance to learn from our pain. One of its lessons might have been how much we are like others in our vulnerability, our suffering and our flawed leadership. Since we were getting a flood of messages of sympathy and solidarity from around the world, we might have learned from them how to turn pain into compassion and wisdom." "Instead," Driver continues, "we used 9/11 to bolster our own feelings of 'us versus them,' our illusory

> dream of invulnerability and our search for enemies rather than friends. This mentality, a blend of machismo and militarism, has given us bloody Iraq, tempts us to nuke Iran and requires us to look under every rock for dangerous foes." "Given this mentality" he writes, "we will find them." (September 14, 2007, A20)

When I read this, Lord Acton's judgment came to mind: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." However, what is true for the nation is just as applicable to the individual.

In Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ilyich is a successful lawyer and respected judge in Czarist Russia: a man near the peak of his power. Suddenly, he is confronted with the imminence of his own death at the age of forty-five.

After months of painful reflection, induced by his own illness, he is forced to face the truth about his life. "What if my life, my entire conscious life," Ilyich asks himself, "simply was not the real thing?" The life he has built for himself, he suddenly realizes, has been a lie, an illusion, a potential life, not an actual one. Ilyich didn't know what he really wanted in life. What was his problem? For Tolstoy, worldly ambition was Ilyich's problem. It was his attachment to and preoccupation with specific images of success that closed him off to intimations of a better way.

First, Ilyich was fascinated with the power of his office. He reveled in the power of his judgeship—how he controlled and diminished others to enhance himself.

Second, Ilyich was driven by blind social ambition. He longed to be accepted by the social elite of St. Petersburg. He wanted to be with the in-crowd, those that counted. He thought it would elevate his status and significance in public. What it did, in fact, was blunt his moral sensibilities...and lead him to die without having lived a real life.

Ilyich discovered this in the last moments of his life. While thrashing his arms in pain, he unexpectedly caught hold of his son's hand. Immediately, his preoccupation with his own pain dis-

solved. He was delivered from the illusion and unreality of his former life. He saw the light...is converted...his life is redeemed. But he would not live to act on his new revelation. What was revealed to him was the nature of an authentic life and his vocation to live it. Loss, illness, and death can put one in touch with such authenticity. The key, however, to unlocking its secrets is discovering the paradox of human power.

The Paradox of Power

James Baldwin wrote that Americans are not very good at paradox. They tend to categorize, simplify, and separate reality into polar opposites: black/white, straight/gay, life/death, us/them, and so forth. Paradox is, on the other hand, an apparent contradiction. It is one of the hallmarks of human maturity, and, according to John Shea (2005), where we may find God again. Religious traditions, with their sacred texts and representative iconic figures, disclose for us the paradox of human power.

Power for many of us is a dirty word. Liberal Christian theologians are ambivalent, if not downright suspicious, about it. It seems to cut moral corners and run roughshod over people. It seems to operate so different from love. Liberals tend to want to get rid of it. But this only leads to impotence. Power is ubiquitous. It is as ubiquitous as persuasion or friendship. It is an inescapable dimension of human relations. It is fluid, flowing through the entire network of group life. It is what Daniel Finn (2007) calls "the software of daily life." Its reality must be attended to if it is to play a part in the transformation of the world. Power, like so many important words, has two almost opposite meanings. When political "realists" (from Machiavelli to Foucault) talk about power, they have a very clear meaning in mind. Power means the exercise of force; power in this context means to coerce and dominate, to control unilaterally by force or violence.

Thomas Wartenberg (1990) offers a "field theory of power." His conception of power is based on the notion of a magnetic field.

Power is present and functions through a field of influence or "networks" of power (Foucault). Like a magnet, it alters the social space surrounding it. It alters the opportunities, the options, faced by those whom power affects.

Wartenberg (1990) identifies three types of power: force, coercion, and influence. These forms exist in relationships. Their primary location is "in the ongoing, habitual ways in which human beings relate to one another" (165). They are part of the software of organizational life, family life, school life, and the life of the church.

Force is a physical intervention by a human agent to prevent another (human or nonhuman) from doing something. For nearly everyone, it is a daily occurrence in our lives—from forcing open a can of vegetables, to forcing snow from your sidewalks. As a one-directional act against humans (and nonhumans), force is always questionable. It may slide into violence. However, it is not by nature immoral. Parents prevent children from running into the street. Force may have to be used to stop a would-be rapist. And, force may be necessary to restrain an incompetent or criminally dangerous human being. In each case, however, force has to be carefully rationed and morally analyzed.

Coercion is the second form of power. According to Wartenberg (1990), it occurs when a human agent is able to affect another significantly. Coercion exerts pressure on the other to get him/her to act in a desired way. What distinguishes coercion from mere force is the threat, or in fact, the effect of a successful threat. Because of the threat of the first human agent, the other decides to alter what he/she would otherwise do. Coercion is a restriction on the freedom of another. It does allow for innumerable degrees of exercise from psychological intimidation to water boarding. However, like force, it is also not by nature immoral. We can distinguish between good and bad coercion. But transparency is critical here for those with power who want to be moral.

The third form of power is influence. As Wartenberg (1990) puts it: a human agent influences another when one's communication leads the other to "alter her assessment of her action-environment in

a fundamental way" (105). This influence can occur through persuasion based on rational argument, on personal trust, on expertise, or on a combination of argument and trust. So influence is a form of power when it alters the other's action-environment. Wartenberg claims that this form of power is more stable than either force or coercion, since the other willingly does what she does (110).

A book that received quite a bit of attention and praise a few years ago was Joseph Nye's *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (2003). Nye distinguishes between "hard power" and "soft power" in thinking about the power of the United States in the world. The language quickly became absorbed into international discussions. Hard power is the military option. Soft power takes the form of cultural influence. Nye's two kinds of power are simply two kinds of force. The distinction between hard and soft is only a minor issue of degree in the exercise of power. However, Nye never gets to the real paradox of power. His hard and soft powers coerce people in a one-way exercise of force. In a corresponding fashion, Wartenberg's force and coercion are similar to Nye's hard power, while influence (as a form of power) is equivalent to soft power. Here, once again, the paradox of human power is absent.

The real paradox of human power is that power can be almost the exact opposite of force or control. Power can also mean receptiveness. It is an invitation to cooperation. People hanker for an expression of power that is mutual and communal. Etymologically, the word has the same root meaning as possible, passive, or potential—"the capacity for action." Humans are born with the capacity, that is, the power, to be receptive. Here, to receive can be the greatest human power. The paradox of power is that power begins in vulnerability or passivity. But, ironically, it is our human receptiveness or passivity that is our strength. We are able to exercise control of our surroundings by ideas and language. St. Paul writes, "for power is made perfect in weakness...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9–10). The paradox at the heart of human existence is that

receptivity, and our responding to it, is more powerful than simple coercion. Of course, we humans can easily forget our own strength and resort to using force against others when threatened. Force may be the best available option, the best available form of power sometimes. But force should not be equated with power or thought to be the main form of human power. Force, in fact, is the sign that human power has failed. Human power, on the other hand, resides in listening and responding. This receptive mutual exchange leads to cooperation and enhances the power of each. Human life becomes richer the more that receptivity to others is exercised. To paraphrase Lord Acton's statement: power, in this form, tends to heal and reveal, and absolute power, in this form, heals and reveals absolutely.

A Spirituality of Mortality

Nowhere is the paradox of human power revealed and tested more than in loss, illness, and death. People who glory in their possession of power may find they are living in a delusion; the first heart attack may bring them to reality. The very young, the very old, and the sick are the ever-present reminders that human life is surrounded by dependence.

But the possibility exists that suffering and illness can make us callous, bitter, insensitive, angry, and imbalanced. It does not always lead to moral intelligence and insight. It can also motivate the snipers who killed the students at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois universities.

There is another way of relating to illness, however—a redemptive way, a transforming way, the way of, what I call, a spirituality of mortality. Suffering can make a person (go) deep. It can direct one to an inner core to bring it all together. We see this in great people—Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa. Both saw the deep secret of life, suffered a lot, and came out serene on the other side. From a Christian perspective, the secret of life is the cross of Christ: it is the bro-

kenness of Jesus on the cross. Inside of brokenness, inside of pain, inside of humiliation is the key to understanding life. Accepting and incorporating the reality of suffering and death into our lives is the inner light. It is the needed hermeneutic. The cross does that for us. It is a school of humility.

Dorothee Soelle (1975), writing in the context of worldwide suffering, asserts that humans learn through suffering. Suffering makes one more sensitive to the pain in the world. It can teach us to put forth a greater love for everything that exists. "As with all historical experiences," Soelle writes, "there are various possibilities for relating oneself to suffering. We can remain the people we were before or we can change. We can adopt the attitude of the 'knowing one,' of the clever person who saw it coming...but we can also find our way to the other attitude, that of learning." Soelle continues:

> In a certain sense learning presupposes mystical acceptance; the acceptance of life, an indestructible hope. The mystics have described how a person can become free and open, so that God is born within the depths of his soul; they have pointed out that a person in suffering can become "calm" rather than apathetic, and that the capacity for love is strongest where it grows out of suffering. (126–27)

For Soelle, this learning in and from suffering brings a form of liberation. Those who learn in suffering, who use the experience to overcome old insights, who experience their own strength and come to know the pain of the living, are beginning the exodus.

What great spiritual writers do essentially is to introduce us to ourselves. They shine a flashlight inside us. They are religious psychologists. They disclose the inside of our human experience...what we have been running away from all our lives, namely, our own mortality. John of the Cross observes that receptivity to our suffering and mortality can make sense of everything. It can lead to an

inner serenity. However, nothing can be learned from individual human suffering unless it is worked through. But how do we humans do that?

Two contrasting examples offer case studies in how, and how not, to do it.

David Rieff (2008) offers an intimate and vivid account of his mother's, the writer Susan Sontag's, final illness and death. Sontag was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1975, at age forty-two. She survived the draconian treatment, only to develop uterine cancer in the late 1990s. Again she survived, and again she developed a new cancer. She died in 2004. Three decades of having cancer, waiting for it to recur or being treated for it might be a catalyst for some for religious contemplation or philosophical reflection. In Sontag, it brings out the rebellious adolescent. Each battle and victory strengthens her appetite for life and her conviction that she was immortal.

Rieff (2008) questions whether, on some level, his mother thought she was too special to die. "She believed in her own will," he writes, "and grandiose though it may seem, in her own star. My mother came to being ill imbued with a profound sense of being the exception to every rule" (74). Her life-organizing principle was: she could accomplish what she could will in life. That same belief made it impossible for her to accept that her fatal illness was not another circumstance she could master.

During her last nine months, Sontag embarked on an all-out campaign to cure an incurable disease. As chronicled by her son, David Rieff, she underwent a bone marrow transplant that failed, recurrent hospitalization, dire infections, wild mood swings, and gruesome mental and physical suffering. In the midst of this dreadful ordeal, there was a desperate Internet search for more and better treatment. She never admitted she was dying. Even her family, friends, and physicians were unwilling or unable to help her accept the inevitable. Rather they were cast in the role of cheerleaders. Their job was to enthusiastically endorse her struggle, always to be optimistic and supportive and never, ever, to talk

about death. Rieff, in the role of head cheerleader, writes: "What she wanted from me was an adamant refusal to accept that it was ever possible that she might not survive" (74). Sontag believed, in her own secular and agnostic way, from the day she was diagnosed that she could once again best the odds, not through New Age beliefs, but through new science.

Biological death is not the worst of happenings. It is something to be accepted when all the signs point to its appropriateness. We need an approach to death that is necessarily a religious one. Sontag's answer is a confirmation of the bankruptcy of Western enlightenment.

A more realistic, pragmatic, and yet philosophical and religious response is offered by Eugene O'Kelly in his book, *Chasing Daylight* (2006). O'Kelly, a fifty-three-year-old American chief executive of the accounting firm KPMG, was diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer in May 2005. *Chasing Daylight* is a commonsense guidebook on how to die. O'Kelly sends the message: stop and smell the roses, enjoy every sandwich. O'Kelly had been a controlling, orderly, privileged, and powerful businessman. He sometimes felt like an eagle on a mountaintop. Then, to his astonishment, the mountain disappeared after he learned he had three brain tumors. Suddenly he rethought his living and dying from the ground up.

O'Kelly describes discovering the world around him—nature, connection with loved ones, living in the moment as if for the first time. He searched for ways to savor what was within his grasp without yearning for the impossible. His religious faith was a significant assistance to him in his quest. The book describes O'Kelly's medical decline: his vision began to dim, his handwriting deteriorated, simple tasks became onerous. "One thing at a time" became the motto and instruction. He wondered what it would take to make healthy people slow down...and live. Eugene O'Kelly died a "good" death on September 10, 2005. He glimpsed elements of the meaning of an authentic life. However, he had also come to realize

that to live is to die: life at the center of things includes the acceptance of death.

Daniel Callahan, of the Hastings Center, has sought to explore the folly of what he calls the "gospel of medical progress," namely, the idea that medicine brings the good news of liberation from death and dying. He claims it is an empty promise of an infinitely postponed mortality and a modern form of idolatry. Callahan reminds us that suffering caused by illness and death can be reduced but never, never overcome. The best medicine can do is to be committed unequivocally to care. In his book *The Troubled Dream of Life* (1993), he writes that most of us cling to "illusions of mastery" of our own bodies, our own health, our own future. Life becomes a quest for autonomy, independence, and control. This search for independence puts death out of mind (but not out of sight), leaving almost no place in public discourse for a meaningful discussion of suffering, decline, and death as inevitable companions in life. Death, from this perspective, is defeat, a cruel destroyer at the end of life. Callahan is not morosely obsessed with mortality (although his Irish background may color his perspective!). For him, caring is at least as important as curing. But he is convinced that the "flight from dependency," suffering, and death is a "flight from humanity." Human life, fundamentally, incorporates interdependency and brokenness. We need to be receptive to that human reality. Herein lies the unique power of humans.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam each affirm the uniqueness of the human. Humans are the best at suffering, they declare. We can foresee our own deaths, and suffer not only in dying, but also in thinking about dying. Other animals can suffer painful deaths, but only humans get the news six months, nine months, eighteen months in advance, so that we can start experiencing the long process of dying. Humans are able to exercise control of these circumstances by inner reflection. With a spirituality of mortality, they can discern that suffering and death are the tragic center of all of life's schemes. They are what David Tracy calls "boundary

experiences" or "limit-situations" that disclose to us our basic existential faith (or unfaith) in the very meaning of life.

Charles Taylor writes:

> The connection of death with meaning is reflected in...the way in which facing death, seeing one's life as about to come to an end, can concentrate the issue of what we have lived for. What has it all amounted to? In other words, death can bring out the question of meaning in its most acute form. This is what lies behind Heidegger's claim that an authentic existence involves a stance of Sein-zum-Tode, being-toward-death. (2007, 14)

This confronts us with ultimate questions and concerns. The rest of life seems petty, strange, and foreign now to this authentic world. This is the point where we experience the religious dimension of life.

So the cross can be either a riddle or a redemptive symbol. Mystics have described how suffering and dying can have transformative possibilities (Ruffing 1994). They can be our tutor:

1. releasing us from our own self-interest;
2. reorganizing our lives around a transcendent center of meaning;
3. becoming open and receptive to the birth of God within;
4. uniting our suffering to the redemptive suffering of Christ;
5. enlarging our compassion for the suffering of others in the world.

In Christian theological terms, dying like this, in communion with all, means dying "in Christ." But to die "in Christ" is also to rise "with Christ." One is freed from limited communion for greater communion. The Christian and Jewish term for that is *resurrection*. Resurrection, then, is a negative, or more precisely, a

double negative term. It affirms life by negating the negation of life. In other words, life is affirmed in spite of real death. As William Butler Yeats wrote, "All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born." That is the paradox of power at the center of the Christian Gospel.

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PART II

Psychological Dimensions of Life, Loss, and Death