

INSIDE THE MIRACLE

ENDURING SUFFERING,
APPROACHING WHOLENESS

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sounds true
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ENDURING SUFFERING

In life one plays the hand one is dealt to the best of one's ability. Those who insist on playing, not the hand they were given, but the one they insist they should have been dealt—these are life's failures. We are not asked if we will play. That is not an option. Play we must. The option is how.

ANTHONY DE MELLO

It's snowing in March, and the large flakes are drifting every which way looking for a home, each as fragile as a life on Earth trying to find its place in the mysterious swirl and flow that has gone on forever. And to its surprise, each flake falling from the sky lands and merges with the Earth, becoming part of what's foundational. This too is our fate. We're tossed into life, headlong and heartlong, into swirls of fragility, which eventually merge us with all that's foundational. Of course, there's pain and fear and worry along the way, even times of despair when all we know seems so very close to being erased. But hard as it is, being erased is part of the incubation of all that's substantial. When erased of our assumptions and conclusions, we're returned to the innocence of childhood. This is how we begin again. I have found myself in all these phases, more than once: waking suddenly in mid-fall from the sky, feeling more fragile than I could bear, afraid my very self will be erased, only to land and merge with the thing that outlasts us all. Such moments of joining can stun us into a turn of resilience. No one can guide us through this process. We can only bear witness that it's possible, even probable.

The pieces in this section are personal accounts of this mysterious and arduous journey, in and out of being half-hearted and whole-hearted, in and out of feeling ill and feeling well, in and out of fearing death and welcoming rebirth. Most of these pieces were written in my thirties and early forties. The essays here unfold what I saw when closest to death. In "God, Self, and Medicine," I discovered how the part is always in relationship to the Whole, whether we acknowledge this kinship or not. In "A Terrible Knowledge," I discovered the paradox of suffering and the necessity of feeling in order to move through our suffering. And in "Dance of the Seed," I discovered the puncture of grief and the endless proliferation of life that reseeds itself once we, as its carrier, are gone. The poems in this section are raw accounts of my confusion of what to do with my will, where to place it, and when it made no difference. The poems explore the hard gift of waiting and letting go, and how my suffering forever opened me to the suffering of others.

All of these pieces offer a sense of what it means to endure, a sense of what's necessary in order to face, experience, and enliven the life we're given.

Each of us must enhance our inner skills if we're to live a full life: how to be whole-hearted, how to face death and welcome rebirth, how to stay in relationship to the Whole, how to inhabit the necessity of feeling in order to move through our suffering, how to withstand the puncture of grief until it reveals the proliferation of life, how to learn what to do with our will and when to surrender, and how to accept the hard gift of waiting and letting go. Our experience with these qualities forms our personal practice of enduring.

GOD, SELF, AND MEDICINE

Since long before the story of Job, human beings, the most fragile and durable of all species, have had to deal with the paradox of suffering. And in our pain we ache to know, if there is a God, how can that eternal presence sanction pain and breakage, and further, in the face of all this, how can such an all-knowing force fuel us with the capacity and sensitivity to suffer so acutely. From the young slave crushed by a stone headed for the top of a pyramid to the senseless shooting of a clerk in Detroit, those left to grieve have asked in Universal echo *why*, as the rest of us stand in silent chorus voicing a bewildered hymn that has lasted centuries.

It is no mistake that to suffer means *to feel keenly, to undergo experience*. As we flex our knot of blood, which some call heart, we're blessed and cursed to stumble through the searing moments that both threaten and enrich our lives. For to feel keenly is the only path to transformation and wholeness, if it doesn't kill us first. Just like the stubborn rocks along the ocean, the pounding of the deep, in time, will reveal an inner beauty otherwise hidden, if we can endure the scouring. But we are not rocks. Our acuteness of perception and inner sensation, our unprecedented range of thought and mood, make us so vulnerable that we can die and be reborn daily, an emotional form of Prometheus. So our continual quest is to stay more renewed than devoured; our chief task, to find a way to gain enough from what is revealed to survive the pain of such opening.

That's the point of engaging our experience: to gain enough from what we feel to survive the pain in feeling it, to live through the thresholds that paradox offers, to live through the pain of breaking to the other side, into the rearrangement of nothing

less than our very lives. In truth, we don't have to seek this sort of experience. We can't avoid it. We somehow have to find the courage to feel the days keenly.

My breaking has, indeed, led me into an expanding love of being that is clearly God. I have been broken by disease and know fully that there are moments endured from which our lives will never be the same, severe moments beyond which everything is changed. No one asks for these moments. They simply happen the way a merciless wind cracks a tree we never imagined would crack.

I know now, that being human, we are each the crucible, the ever-changing inlet through which the greater Whole in all its forms ebbs and flows. Indeed, every time the Universe, through Nature or God, flows through us, we are rinsed larger, cleansed and charged again. What is medicine, if not the laws of nature applied to cleanse the self? And what is God, if not the laws of Spirit applied to enlarge the self? It implies that to enlarge is cleansing; to grow, healing. In this way, to talk about the art of healing is to investigate the various ways, both natural and spiritual, that the Whole, if taken in, can preserve the part.

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Until my cancer diagnosis, I'd never been ill. I was terrified, and nothing was helping me conquer the fear. Initially, I felt a traumatic paralysis, the fast breathing, huddled fear of a wounded animal lying still in the brush, expecting to be struck again. This is worse than outright pain, this is withdrawing from anything that can help. This is the power of fear—to make us recoil from anything larger. While in this state, nothing flows through, and therefore, nothing cleanses or enlarges. The center remains cut off when it needs to be renewed more

than ever. My life has taught me that how we first stand after doubling over is crucial to whether we will heal at all.

In time, I was broken of my illusion that fear could be conquered. Instead, I began to watch the winter trees as they let the wind through, always through. Since then, I've learned that fear gets its power from not looking, that it's intensified by isolation, that it's always more strident when we are self-centered. Now, when I am full of fear, which can't be avoided, I try, though I don't always succeed, to break its stridency by breaking my egocentrism. I try to quiet its intensity by admitting my fear to loved ones, and I try to disempower its exaggeration by looking directly into exactly what I fear. I try to know that though I can be fearful, I am more than my fear.

But life under siege hides none of its difficulties. The endless decisions that must be made, each imperative and of great consequence, do not wait for us to manage our fear. Indeed, one is always *thrust* into the world of cancer, and there is no escort. When I was so thrust, I uncannily met my counterparts, Janice and Tom. Janice was a strong, determined woman who believed primarily in self. She did not believe in medicine and therefore put her entire well-being and treatment into her own hands. She rejected all medical intervention, and if she utilized anything greater than her self, it remained a secret liaison till the end. She was tenacious but died a painfully drawn-out death. Now, there isn't a doctor's visit I don't feel Janice over my shoulder. I understand her resistance more and more, for the things we're asked to do to preserve our well-being are not pleasant. Yet in the hard breath before each decision, I see her reliance solely on self and fear its imbalance.

Tom, on the other hand, was adrift. He seemed to have lost his sense of self and had a disinterested entropic view of the world. He put his fate completely in the judgment of medicine. And so,

I watched Tom grow smaller in the space he took up. I watched Tom give no resistance whatsoever to what doctors wanted to do. The English poet William Blake said, “Without contraries there is no progression.” Tom presented no healthy contrary, and thus, there was no progression. He became invisible, vanishing piece by piece. By Christmas of that year, he no longer knew who I was. By February, he died.

I feel roughly blessed to have Tom and Janice as specters of where I must not go, though the further I travel here, the more compassion I have for how easily, in any given moment, the Tom in me or the Janice in me can take over.

While Tom and Janice died, I was broken and healed and broken again. The first time, my tumor vanished. It was a miracle. When its sister began to thicken the rib in my back, I began with fervor the same rigorous visualizations and meditations and intensive prayers for hours each day, desperate to enlist the same overwhelming grace. But after six weeks, I was exhausted and humbled, for the tumor in my rib had only grown. I thought I had failed. The fear returned, now as terror. And in making my decision to have that rib removed, I heard Janice spurn my doctor and saw Tom with indifference bow. But I believe in God and in this strange familiar terrain, known as me, in which life and He meet. So, I waited till these elements merged, way down beneath my understanding, and there, in what felt like calm balance, I said yes, help me. With that, it became clear that this time, the *surgery* was the miracle.

Once home, it hurt so much to breathe that it took several tries to make it to my rocker where I moaned and thought, *the part has no peace unless it can feel its place in the larger Whole*. I struggled in my pain of breathing not to become the pain in my breathing. I tried to focus on birds and light and the sway of trees. I petted my golden retriever while inhaling—anything to soften the cut of my missing rib.

Within weeks I had my first chemo treatment, which was horrific, vomiting for twenty-four hours, my missing rib lancing me with every heave. For the next three weeks I vowed I would not continue, would never open my arm to that needle again. But in the dark center of my pain, an unwavering voice said: “Poor, challenged man—the *treatment* is the miracle.” And so, with more terror than I have ever known, I said yes and opened my arms to measured poisons. Finally, after four months of treatment, I sat in our wellness group where truth could relax its way out of hiding, and there I was asked to draw my cancer and my treatment, and suddenly I knew—the cancer was gone. Now the treatment was killing me, and the miracle appeared as the silent certainty with which I took my good doctor’s hand and said: “No, it’s over. I won’t do this anymore.”

What a revelation—who would have guessed—that miracle is a process and not an event and that each situation demands a different aspect of miracle: visualizations, yes; craniotomy, no; visualizations, no; thoracic surgery, yes; chemo-cleansing, if I must; chemo-poison, no. And underneath it all: willful, constant prayer, an unrehearsed dialogue with God, as Martin Buber puts it.

Still, even years later, I am not exempt from the fear and fragility. We’re always asked to enlarge our sense of things in order to right-size the fear and to carry our fragility. It’s a constant challenge to find the current of life and to trust it, to behold the depth of what-is until a relaxation of intent and anxiety allows us to find the spaces in our individuality that we then know as Spirit. Only through the passageways of Spirit can we be lifted when we’re heavy and rinsed of the exaggerations of our fear.

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During my odyssey with cancer, I learned a great many things. One of the most crucial was the almost simultaneous need to inhabit myself while staying connected to others. With each test, office visit, surgery, and treatment, I had to prepare, as best I could, for things no one could anticipate. In order to do this, I had to center myself and connect with the underlying flow of Universe that fills me with a strength and perspective beyond my tiny self. To do this, I needed to be alone. I needed to enter my solitude, which once entered becomes a threshold to everything that is elemental, eternal, and divine. All my loved ones grew to expect my gathering inward, especially before each medical procedure. But once centered, once in the Universal flow, I had to connect with my loved ones in order to endure the experience.

Now that I'm well, the ways in which we survived—alone and together—have stayed with me, and the more I have thought about them, the more they represent a basic and unavoidable paradox about living, which is this: Though each of us must go through our suffering alone, no one can make it alone. Though no one can save us from our own feelings, not one of us can carry those feelings in the world without the support of others.

I remember wheeling Ann to her surgery, her stretcher wobbling down the sanitized hall, her groggy eyes looking back at me, our hands entwined. I wheeled her as far as they would let me, and then, quite suddenly, though I knew it was coming, the glass doors of the operating room stopped me and she was wheeled on. I stood there, pressed against the glass, watching her grow smaller and smaller.

I realized then that whether it be our search for purpose, our struggle with confusion, our working through grief, or the violent evolution of our identity, no one can go beyond the glass door with you. Each of us must do that work alone. Each of us must ask our questions and feel our pain and be surprised by wonder in the very personal terrain that exists beyond that glass door. The best we

can do in loving others is wheel each other as far as possible and be there when our loved ones return. But the work that changes our very lives, the work that yields inner transformation, the work that allows us to be reborn within the same skin must always be done alone. This is the work of solitude, and the attending to and from the glass door is the work of compassion, and the sharing of what we each discover in our solitude is the work of education, and the wisdom by which we weave that inner knowledge and that compassion—this is the work of community.

Whether walking a loved one into surgery or investigating the spiritual formation of teachers, we need both solitude and community to enliven our compassion. For only both paths—inner and outer—can yield the miracle of the Whole.

Yet how do we access the flow and miracle of the Whole? How can we when broken, open ourselves to all that is not broken? It all begins with faith—faith in everything larger than the singular self. It helps here to remember that faith is inextricably linked to care.

As the theologian Paul Tillich contends:

Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned, an act of the total personality. It is the most centered act of the human mind.

Ultimately, faith is no more than the willingness and bravery to be ultimately concerned, fueling that fire of concern with everything that matters. The mystery is that taking the risk to be so ultimately concerned *in itself* makes us more whole. And what is compassion, but being ultimately concerned about something other than ourselves?

In actuality, miracle is the process of ultimate concern, and one aspect of miracle is what happens when love makes us cross over into the sharing of each other's pain.