



Does Anyone Understand What I'm Going Through? Understanding the Path of Suffering...

When we're suffering, when the pain of our particular challenge or loss takes up every bit of our energy, it often seems as though *nobody* understands what we're going through. It might be a betrayal or divorce, the death of a loved one, a serious diagnosis, even the loss of a dream. In the thick of it we find ourselves in a pit of our own pain while the rest of the world goes about its business, adding emotional isolation to our suffering. Well-meaning people try to help, but sometimes their advice or common platitudes (*Everything happens for a reason... God never gives us more than we can handle... When a door closes a window opens...*) only make us feel more hopeless.

Surprisingly, instead of trying to avoid, deny, or anesthetize the pain, it's helpful to recognize the typical "signposts" along the "Path of Suffering" to validate and honor our own experience and that of others. While no two journeys are alike, we can be assured that what we're feeling is, in some way, what everyone has experienced or *will* experience, and that, in fact, we're not alone. *Acknowledging the stark reality of the path is the first step toward transformation.*

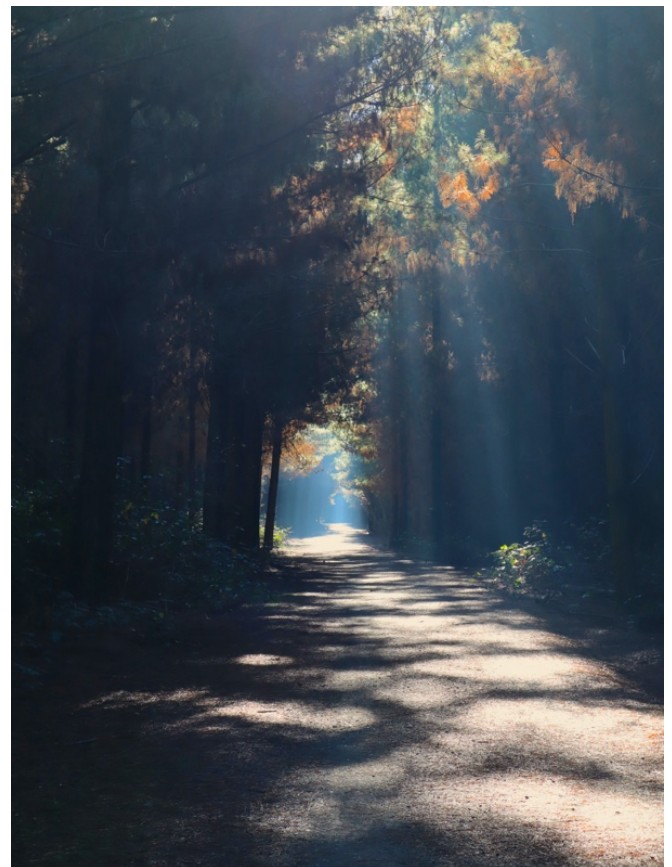
What are the "Signposts along the Path of Suffering":

1. Dealing with Overwhelming Thoughts and Emotions - It's hard to believe that life has dealt us such an unfair hand. "Why me?" is a question we'll ask, over and over. "Why has God allowed this to happen?" Obsessively asking unanswerable questions produces even greater mental anguish. We feel constantly bullied by repetitive, unrelenting

thoughts, sending us into regrets of the past or worries about the future.

2. Relying on our Instinctive Coping Mechanisms -

We're torn between the desire to crawl up in a ball and retreat, or to be strong and fight with everything we've got. Raging thoughts and emotions can activate a state of *denial*, providing some space in which to adjust and cope. Eventually we may become *resigned* to the situation or even *accept* it, but the focus of all of our attention is still on trying to control the uncontrollable.



3. Interacting with Family and Friends - A loss or challenge may require a redefinition of family roles and rules. It will demand that we renegotiate who does what, when, and how. How open or closed is our family system? How close or separate will the family members be? How flexible or structured? Some family members over-function and drive us crazy, suffocating us with their constant worry

and attention. Others may under-function, making us wonder if they expect us to shoulder this alone.

4. Navigating Outside Support Systems - Out of necessity, we often turn to professionals and institutions for help. Our attitudes toward medical or other service providers typically run the gamut between disdain and adulation. With their sometimes objective, dispassionate demeanor, we can bounce between feeling like a helpless victim, a resistant agitator, or a demanding complainer. The frustration of trying to find the right help, make and juggle appointments, budget for billable hours - all take time, energy, and resources we may not have.

5. Grappling with our Faith - Eventually we usually turn to God, wondering, "Where is God in this? How could God allow this to happen?" We may feel deserted and angry at



God. Where is the faith we thought we had? We may realize that the depth of our faith isn't adequate to carry us through this, and feel compelled to rethink our spiritual life.

6. Feeling Tired, Stuck, and Relationally Depleted - Our challenge demands every ounce of our emotional, spiritual, and physical energy, day in and day out. All our attention is focused on trying to turn the situation around. It is all-encompassing, and exhausting. Our thoughts race out of control and worries rage inside us. It's hard to follow a conversation or engage with anyone in a mindful way. Being constantly pummeled by negative emotions makes us feel there's just no way to escape. Our suffering upstages and overshadows every other aspect of our lives, leaving not a shred of relational energy.

7. Realizing there's No Turning Back - We want to go back to when life was "normal," we fantasize about what it would be like to somehow miraculously turn things around, but there's a growing realization that we can't. We experience sadness and grief over the loss of what has been. This grief, on top of the depression, sadness, and anger brings about a heaviness that weighs us down. We're stuck between no way forward and no way back.

8. Traversing the Dark Hole - We may begin to describe our suffering as being "sucked into a dark hole." The intensity of this abyss is proportionate to our physical, emotional, and/or spiritual suffering. We feel as though there is nothing but this all-encompassing darkness, sometimes referred to as a "dark night of the soul."

9. Adapting to a New Normal - We begin to realize that having reached a point of no return, we're forced to adapt to a "new normal" that we don't want to accept. We know now that what was will be no more.

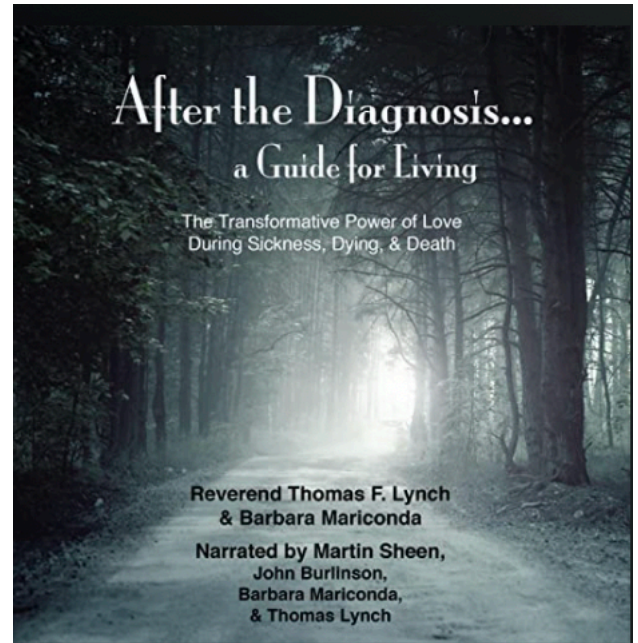
10. Who am I Becoming? - Understanding we can't go back, we begin to ask big questions - Who am I, really? What is my worth? Will I continue to struggle to control the uncontrollable? Or can I surrender it all to a power greater than myself? Who do I trust - myself - or God? What is being birthed out of this "death"?

So, where do we find ourselves along this path?

During any period of prolonged suffering we're like grapes being crushed – we'll produce some kind of wine – bitter or sweet. The instinctive reaction is to continue to hang on to what's familiar, to cling to the shell of our former selves, increasing our suffering with the futility of the task and producing a lot of bitterness – the old wineskins will finally burst.

The alternative is to choose a new way of walking the path (putting new wine in new wineskins). The literal reality of what we're dealing with won't change – but if we do the spiritual and emotional work, we'll be freer to love, have fewer attachments, and therefore become a conduit for God's love. As we let go and ease into our new reality we'll continue to grieve, but along with grief will shine the first light of inner healing. Our image of God will soften and expand. The outer trappings and concerns of life will become less important, and we'll begin to recognize that the only thing that really matters is love.

How can we begin the life-long spiritual work of transformation that's beyond resignation and acceptance? There are no quick-fixes or magic bullets. This kind of transformative work requires a slow, recursive process full of stops and starts. We wrote "After the Diagnosis...A Guide for Living" as a roadmap for anyone on this Path of Suffering. Can we really transform our suffering? Yes, with God we can.



Available on Amazon in softcover and audiobook formats.

Barbara Mariconda

©2022 Journey of the Soul Books

Visit us at www.journeyofthesoulministry.com