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□ Faith Today

Broken dreams... Broken people

The litany of human suffering

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

For several years while her children grew up, the woman offered loving support and encouragement to her husband as he fought and finally won his battle against alcohol.

A period of uneventful, though content, family living followed. But then the woman's husband fell ill, with a debilitating, long-term illness. The woman helped her husband through the several years before he died. With the support of sympathetic friends and her church's minister, she usually maintained a cheerful front as she carried out her responsibilities as helpmate, nurse and mother.

After her husband's death, the woman rebuilt her life. She rejoiced in her career as a preschool principal. She found happiness in her three children, watching them establish their own careers, marry and start their own families.

As the woman approached 65, she retired. Free of responsibility now, she wanted more leisure for hobbies and traveling. But two months later disaster struck.

Her daughter, not yet 40 and the mother of two teen-agers, was stricken with cancer. Seemingly cured the first time around, a second and more distressing cancer appeared a few months later.

Once again, the woman rallied. She packed up her belongings and went to live with her daughter and son-in-law, offering to help as long as she was needed. But now the lightness was gone from her voice and tears hid just behind her eyes.

For me, the woman in this true story is a modern Job. Like Job, she copes with suffering without giving up, in spite of the seeming lack of justice in the events.

As Pope John Paul II notes in his recent apostolic letter on suffering, "The Book of Job poses in an extremely acute way the question of the 'why' of suffering; it also shows that suffering strikes the innocent."

In his perceptive letter, the pope addresses two separate groups: those who suffer and those who encounter others who suffer.

Lenten Series

The "why" of pain and anguish remains one of the great human mysteries. But while it isn't easy to understand, suffering does find some purpose. It can transform the sufferer, evoke compassion, and unleash the power of love.

The pope acknowledges that suffering is a great, and often impenetrable mystery. An "intangible mystery" often cloaks the person who suffers, he states.

Seeing someone suffer "evokes compassion" and respect. But it also can intimidate us, adds the pope, who is no stranger to personal suffering. Following a 1981 attempt on his life, the pope spent more than a hundred days in the hospital.

Human beings alone know they are suf-

fering and wonder why, the pope argues. And he believes people suffer "in a humanly speaking, still deeper way" if they can't find a satisfactory answer.

Perhaps reflecting his own experience, the pope offers some suggestions on how to approach suffering. He stresses that it is not a matter of remaining passive in the face of suffering. But, he adds, coping with suffering is complicated by the fact that people react to it in different ways.

The task always begins within the individual, the pope continues, and "it often takes time, even a long time," to work through to some sort of answer.

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Sometimes, as St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius of Loyola discovered, suffering leads to transformation. Individuals see themselves as completely new persons; they discover a new dimension in their lives.

One obstacle individuals may need to overcome is the terrible feeling of uselessness "that is sometimes very strongly rooted in human suffering," the pope said.

The fear of being "a burden to others" can be difficult to shake, he indicates. But, if all else fails, the philosopher-pope has a suggestion: Sufferers should remember the "irreplaceable service" they may provide.

To explain, the pope draws a connection between the Parable of the Good Samaritan and what he calls the "gospel of suffering." These are linked, he says.

The Good Samaritan reveals "what the relationship of each of us must be toward our suffering neighbor." Availability, the pope writes, is the key to being a good neighbor. It means putting one's whole heart into bringing whatever help is needed to another person who suffers.

And the Good Samaritan benefits, the pope thinks. Love is unleashed in the Good Samaritan by the suffering of the person who is aided. In this way, "the world of human suffering unceasingly calls for...another world: the world of human love."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

