

The Revd Dr Trystan Owain Hughes is the Anglican Chaplain at Cardiff University. He attained an MTh from Oxford University, with a thesis on suffering and contemplative prayer, and a PhD in twentieth-century church history from the University of Wales, Bangor. He is the author of *Winds of Change: The Roman Catholic Church and Society in Wales 1916–1962* (University of Wales Press, 1999) and numerous articles (such as two in the prestigious *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Cambridge University Press, 2002 and 2005). He runs well-attended meditative retreats and quiet days at parish, diocesan and university level and lectures at Cardiff University and St Michael's College, Llandaff.



FINDING HOPE AND  
MEANING IN  
SUFFERING



Trystan Owain Hughes

**SPCK**

First published in Great Britain in 2010

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge  
36 Causton Street  
London SW1P 4ST

Copyright © Trystan Owain Hughes 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

SPCK does not necessarily endorse the individual views contained in its publications.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, a member of the Hachette UK Group. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of International Bible Society. UK trademark number 1448790.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189, USA. All rights reserved.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-06249-2

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong  
Printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

*I dedicate this book to those who have taught me  
what it means to become as a child to enter the  
Kingdom of Heaven – especially to my nephews,  
Aled Siôn, Iwan Rhys, Charlie Llewelyn and Evan Bryn,  
and my niece and goddaughter, Alis Anwen.*



# Contents



<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Prologue: beyond thinking</i>	1
1 Suffering	7
2 Foundations: awareness	18
3 Foundations: acceptance	28
4 Building blocks: nature	38
5 Building blocks: laughter	50
6 Building blocks: memory	64
7 Building blocks: art	74
8 Building blocks: helping others	86
<i>Epilogue: looking ahead</i>	97
<i>Bibliography</i>	102

# Acknowledgements

---

This book has been hewn from both the sharp and the smooth rocks of life experience. As such, I'd like to say *diolch o'r galon* ('thanks from the heart') to everyone who has touched my life over the past 37 years. I especially owe so much to all the people who have stood alongside me during difficult times and to all those who have allowed me to stand alongside them in their own suffering, especially during my curacies in the Rectorial Benefices of Llantwit Major and Whitchurch, Cardiff.

More specifically I would like to thank the following who have directly assisted and supported this book:

Nicola Davies, for her helpful suggestions and continual enthusiasm for the book, despite my asking her to re-read it on far too many occasions.

Kath Lawley, Perry Buck, John and Catryn Rowlands, Peter Jones, Andrew James, Katie Leonard, and Gwynan Hughes, who all gave advice on parts, or all, of the book.

Craig and Ros Bishop, for graciously allowing me to use the email about little Amelia.

Gwydion Thomas for permission to use extracts from R. S. Thomas's poems, the Committee of the Rhys Thomas James Pantyfedwen Lampeter Eisteddfod for permission to use the extract from the hymn 'Pantyfedwen', and Illtud Griffiths for permission to use the extract from J. Henry Griffiths's English translation of the hymn 'Pantyfedwen'.

### *Acknowledgements*

All at SPCK, especially Alison Barr, for believing that others would want to read the book.

The Archbishop of Wales, Barry Morgan, for reading an early draft of the book, and especially for having faith in me when life took unexpected turns.

Kath and Mike Lawley, for their love and kindness during both joyous and difficult times.

Granddad Don Bathgate, for his wise thoughts about ‘memories’.

Uncle Llew, Grandma Olive, Nicholas Woodhead, Nain, and Taid, who are all still ‘*presente*’.

My mum (Ros), dad (Berw), and the rest of the family for their continual support and love.



## *Prologue: beyond thinking*



‘When things aren’t going well during a match, I look at myself’  
*Cristiano Ronaldo, footballer*

‘When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged  
to change ourselves’  
*Viktor Frankl*

Recently, while tidying areas of my study that had not seen daylight for many a year, I found a small, yellowed piece of paper. On that paper was a list I had made as a student of my ‘all-time favourite songs’. It is, of course, only as students that we find the time to embark on such pointless exercises! But what struck me as I read that list was that the songs were all thoroughly depressing. They included such melancholic classics as ‘Rainy Days and Mondays’, ‘I Just Can’t Be Happy Today’ and ‘Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now’, as well as songs from such dark songwriters as Johnny Cash, Jacques Brel and Leonard Cohen. Topping the list, however, was Gilbert O’Sullivan’s ‘Alone Again, Naturally’. This upbeat song, in which the singer revels in his pain and his fleeting thoughts of suicide, joyously asks why God, if indeed he does exist, has finally deserted him to a life of loneliness and misery.

In reflecting on my list of gloomy songs, it dawned on me that, as a student, I revelled and dwelt on any misery that came my way. This was not continual or constant, by any means, as I was often happy, upbeat, and cheerful. But once there was a chink in the dam of my emotions, I’d happily allow that dam to collapse. Melancholy begat melancholy, depression begat depression, and suffering begat suffering. Worse still, I cultivated an almost perverse sense of pride in how bad I was seen to be suffering. I even enjoyed hearing the question ‘Can it get any worse for you?’

In November 2006, my life was to change beyond description, when, at the age of 34, I was diagnosed with a degenerative spinal

condition. The one quality that is widely regarded as determining a person's happiness and fulfilment is health. By all accounts, my back condition, which (after an operation and months in hospital) has left me unable to sit or stand for any length of time, should have, therefore, brought unhappiness. Yet, despite continuing chronic pain, frustration and disability, my illness has actually done the opposite, giving me the opportunity to reflect on where meaning and hope can be sought in our pain and suffering, and then to apply the fruits of this reflection to my day-to-day life.

My story, of course, is in no way unique. One of the first things that struck me when I began my ministerial pastoral work was the fact that behind the smiles of even the most joyous people were, or had been, times of awful suffering and pain. There certainly comes a time in most of our lives when we are forced to take a step back from the everyday existence that we have thus far taken for granted. Such moments can come through illness (either of oneself or of a family member), emotional ill-health, the loss of a loved one, the break-up of a relationship, the loss of a job, or other painful adversities. 'If you look closely enough,' muses Anthony Hopkins as he studies an egg in the film *Fracture* (2007), 'you'll find everything has a weak-spot where it can break sooner or later.' When confronted with our own time of suffering, we are faced with two pathways. We can, of course, allow our struggles to overwhelm us. The Mexican artist Frida Kahlo was blessed with a wonderful talent, but was blighted through her life with misfortune and pain. A tragic road accident as a teenager left her in chronic pain, reliant on opiates and suffering bouts of depression. A turbulent marriage to her fellow-artist and serial womanizer Diego Rivera made matters all the worse. After many years of struggle and pain, she wrote that her suffering was too much to bear and she would never want to return to participate again in this mortal coil.

Other people, however, choose a very different path in their journey through life's vale of tears. They choose to grasp what little joy, hope or meaning life brings, in spite of the most horrific suffering. Viktor Frankl was a prominent Jewish psychiatrist in Austria in the 1930s. His comfortable life was brought to an abrupt

end when he was taken to a Nazi concentration camp. He lost all his family there, as his father, mother, brother and his wife were all killed in the gas chambers. He lost his identity there, when he was given 'number 119,104' as a new name. And he and his fellow prisoners were forced to endure the most unimaginable suffering – extreme hunger, cold, violence, and the constant expectation of their own extermination.

We looked like skeletons disguised with skin and rags, we could watch our bodies beginning to devour themselves . . . one after another the members of the little community in our hut died . . . 'He won't last long', or, 'This is the next one', we whispered to each other, and when, during our daily search for lice, we saw our own naked bodies in the evening, we thought alike: This body here, my body, is really a corpse already.

Yet, even during this time of despair and darkness, Frankl refused to let those outside circumstances quench his enthusiasm for life. 'It is possible to practise the art of living even in a concentration camp,' he wrote, 'although suffering is omnipresent.'

Frankl's experience, along with the experience of others who suffer in diverse ways, are testimony that life *can* hold meaning and hope, even under the most miserable conditions. Our lives, after all, are viewed through whichever lenses we decide to wear. We are the ones who decide how we react to the situations we face. We can see ourselves as blessed, even in the midst of dreadful suffering. Conversely, we can see ourselves as cursed, even if we are living comparatively comfortable lives. It is important that we recognize the timeless truth that each of us has the option to create and cultivate our own world, instead of succumbing to the one that is weighing us down.

By viewing our pain and suffering in a different way, then, we are able to free ourselves from the prisons of our own thoughts and to find hope and meaning in seemingly hopeless situations. Our own minds, after all, contribute so much to our suffering. How we respond to external situations affects our whole being and even the outcome of specific events. Furthermore, many of us are held captive by what can be described as 'screen-saver

thoughts? Like a screen-saver on a computer, we keep returning to certain default thoughts of anxiety and worry, which are individual and unique to each one of us. Our desperate need is to liberate our minds from such incarceration. ‘Gonna change my way of thinking,’ sang Bob Dylan during his brief flirtation with Christianity. As meaning and hope are food for our souls, it is only by changing our outlook on the world that we will find the internal peace and the external meaning that are necessary for our survival.

Changing our way of thinking, however, will certainly not be an easy journey. The process, which is often long and painful, can be compared to the repentance that John the Baptist preached in the Gospels. The Greek word for repentance (*metanoia*), after all, can be interpreted more literally to denote ‘changing one’s mind’, in the sense of embracing thoughts beyond our present limitations. This book will hopefully set you on your way with this process. Our thoughts, after all, are not us. As Daniel Auteuil maintained in the film *Jean de Florette* (1987): ‘It’s not me that’s crying, it’s my eyes.’ We are, therefore, able to choose a different way of thinking, and subsequently choose a different past, present and future.

Our journey of change can even be embarked upon in the face of initial reluctance within our hearts and emotions. *Feeling* need not come first, as *doing* can actually lead to new ways of thinking, and that will subsequently lead to a transformation of emotions. In other words, we can, through our minds, make ourselves feel things. There is, after all, a thin line between pretending to feel something and actually feeling something. It is, then, possible to practise the techniques in this book, and its ways of viewing the world around us, before we fully appreciate its underlying philosophy of hope and meaning. Prayer and meditation can, likewise, assist in this process. Frankl notes that it was not those who had a robust nature who coped with life at Auschwitz best, but rather those who developed a sense of spirituality. He puts this down to their ability to ‘retreat from their terrible surroundings to life of inner riches and spiritual freedom’. In reflecting on some of the themes presented in the pages that follow, I hope you will recognize that God is not at the end of your journey.

In a sense, God is not even *in* the journey. Rather, God *is* the journey you will be taking.

**Chapter 1** of this book will set the scene for our journey of transformation by analysing the suffering that forces us to face eternal questions of hope and meaning. Some writers suggest that when suffering involves physical, psychological and social elements it should be termed ‘affliction’, while others distinguish between suffering and ‘pain’, which is simply described as the body’s protective network. In this book, however, such terms will not be differentiated, and ‘pain’, ‘suffering’ and ‘affliction’ will be used interchangeably to encompass our individual experiences of loss, grief, damage, disablement or hurt. The chapter does not, however, aim to deal with the question of theodicy, as numerous other volumes exhaust the ‘problem of pain’ (a number of which are listed in the bibliography for this chapter). Rather, the chapter will explore the paradox that learning *how* to suffer and *how* to wait patiently is the secret of finding joy and hope in our lives. **Chapters 2 and 3** will then present the ‘foundations’ that underlie our journey towards discovering hope and meaning in our everyday lives. By engendering the practice of ‘awareness’ and ‘acceptance’ daily, we can allow ourselves to take a step back from our anxieties and worries, and start to appreciate, in the words of singer-songwriter David Gray, ‘life in slow motion’. Once these twin-foundations have been laid, they can then be employed to help us build a tower of hope and meaning in our lives. **Chapters 4 to 8** are, therefore, described as ‘building blocks’, and they consist of an assessment of how, in spite of suffering, God can work through art, nature, memory, laughter, and love of neighbour. After all, when we are in the desert, God gives us manna to eat and springs of refreshing water to quench our thirst.

In a general sense, all the subjects covered in this book are rooted in the biblical tradition, and will be shown to be so. In a more specific sense, however, the ‘foundations’ and the ‘building blocks’ will be expressly related both to the Christian contemplative tradition and to Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Exploring Frankl’s reflection on the horrors of the Holocaust allows

us to recognize that if meaning can be discovered in the place that has become a modern personification of suffering, then it can also be found in our own torn and troubled lives. Christian contemplatives and mystics down the ages, on the other hand, have related the hope in our pain and tragedy directly to God's presence. As Julian of Norwich reminded us, we should not obsess about our condition when we suffer, but rather we should turn towards the 'endless delight of God'. By the time we arrive at the close of this book in the **Epilogue**, then, it is my hope that, no matter how overwhelming our present suffering may seem, we might in some way accept that, echoing the words of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the only real tragedy is for us to have experienced our lives, but to have failed to grasp the meaning.

# 1

## Suffering

---

‘Suffering is a fierce, bestial thing, commonplace, uncalled for, natural as air’

*Cesare Pavese, shortly before his suicide at the age of 42*

‘These times are dark, but every shadow, no matter how deep, is threatened by the morning light’

*Rachel Weisz in The Fountain (2006)*

### *Introduction*

In the film *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) the character Alfredo voices a sentiment that many of us feel at times in our lives. ‘With all due respect to the Lord who made the world in two or three days,’ he says, ‘I’d have taken a bit longer, but certain things I could have done better.’ If we were playing God, there are certainly things about our fallen world that we may well want to change. Even at happy and upbeat times in our own lives, 24-hour news channels serve as a constant reminder that the dark side of life is uncomfortably close. The world continues to be troubled in so many different ways – wars, natural disasters, murder, child abuse, prejudice, hatred and racism. When we personalize suffering, the situation seems even worse, as each one of us has endured pain and suffering at many levels during our lives. We may have lost someone we love, have been affected by illness or disability, have experienced broken relationships, have lost a job, or have experienced other traumas in our lives. Such incidences often take us by surprise, as they strike without warning and with devastating consequences. The playwright Christopher Fry compares the impact of suffering on our lives with an innocent walk on a minefield. ‘One minute

you're taking a stroll in the sun,' he writes, 'the next your legs and arms are all over the hedge.' He simply concludes that 'there's no dignity in it'.

The presence of such awful and indiscriminate suffering in the world is certainly one of the greatest challenges to belief in a loving God. As misery breaks through and our worlds are turned upside-down, words like 'grace' and 'mercy' often seem defunct. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the unfairness and injustice of life is one of the principal reasons given for rejection of God. In the song 'Dear God', the 1980s group XTC stood alongside many of their fellow agnostics and atheists in positing the depth of pain and misery in the world as a reason for their apostasy. God stands accused of failing his creation, as wars, natural disasters and vicious diseases render him culpable. The song concludes that Father, Son and Holy Ghost are nothing but 'somebody's unholy hoax'.

Christians themselves have long recognized that suffering has the potential to alienate people from the faith. 'If this is the way you treat your friends, it is little wonder you have so few of them,' the sixteenth-century mystic St Teresa of Avila was overheard screaming up at God when her ox-cart overturned. The consequence of suffering is, however, often more wide-reaching than a mere rejection of faith. Many fall into resentfulness, intolerance, callousness or insensitivity as a result of their afflictions. It is certainly not our place to judge those who succumb to such bitterness or hard-heartedness, but each and every one of us does have the option of taking a different path through the dark night of our pain.

In facing our suffering, then, our aim should not be to explain away or justify, in the words of Dostoevsky, 'the human tears with which the earth is soaked from its crust to its centre'. Rather, our aim should be to start to make larger sense of, and ultimately learn through, the apparent senselessness of our circumstances. After all, if we are to find meaning and hope in our lives, then it must be equally valid, if not *more* valid, in times of suffering as it is in times of comfort. Furthermore, at the centre of that search for meaning and hope must be the experience of the world's freely given love. Our world may well be deeply flawed in its present

form, but it still offers us a wonderful experience of the love that flows from joyous and life-affirming gifts such as laughter, nature, memories, art and other people. Nietzsche reminded us that ‘he who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*’. It is in these gifts, which for Christians could be termed ‘glimpses of transcendence’ or ‘rumours of another world’, that we can discover the *why* in our torn and troubled lives.

### *Learning to view suffering differently*

Our individual groans of suffering, however comparatively mild they sometimes seem, must all be recognized as significant. In the film comedy *Blades of Glory* (2007), starring Will Ferrell, a pair of champion figure skaters lament the embarrassment of the entry of an all-male pairing into the World Championships. ‘Two men skating together?!’ bewails one of them. ‘And in our division no less! Why is God singling us out for the greatest suffering the world has ever known?!’ While this assertion provides a comedic moment in the film, it does, in fact, stumble across an important truth. Despite the terrible losses and trauma he endured in the death-camps of Poland, Viktor Frankl warns against anyone claiming a monopoly on suffering. Rather, he suggests that *all* suffering should be taken with utmost seriousness, however brief or minor it proves to be. The ‘size’ of suffering, after all, is relative. It is, he claims, like releasing gas into an empty chamber – it doesn’t matter how much gas is released, it will fill the chamber completely. In other words, it does not matter how great or small our sufferings are, they will always hold the potential to darken our hearts completely. It is only natural, then, that we often become self-absorbed, introverted and self-centred during times of suffering. This, in turn, can lead to a crippling guilt or self-hatred.

Rather than dwelling on such unhelpful emotions, however, we need to be rewiring our ways of looking at the world and, therefore, putting our energies into the paradox of forging meaning from the apparent meaningless of our suffering. After all, one thing we have left through any amount of suffering, great or small, is a choice of *how* we react to what we are enduring. ‘The nature

