

A misty mountain landscape with a river flowing through a forested valley. The scene is atmospheric, with thick fog or low clouds hanging over the valley floor and clinging to the slopes of the mountains. The river is a bright, winding line of white water cutting through the dark, dense forest. The overall color palette is muted, consisting of greys, greens, and blues, creating a sense of depth and mystery.

CURT THOMPSON, MD

Author of *The Soul of Shame*

THE DEEPEST PLACE

SUFFERING AND THE
FORMATION OF HOPE

THE DEEPEST PLACE

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SUFFERING AND THE
FORMATION OF HOPE

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The Deepest Place

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*For
Leslie Nunn Reed*

*Whose many decades of support as my friend
and literary agent have been
immeasurably valuable*

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Introduction

INTO THE DEEPEST PLACE



Over the course of walking with many patients who have committed themselves to doing the difficult, often excruciating work of living, I have on many occasions witnessed transformation both glorious and durable for which words fail me. The stories within which this transformation has taken place are as varied as the people who tell them. The depth and duration of the traumas that accompany those stories are equally varied, some seemingly slight, some unspeakably gruesome.

Some stories appear in their first telling to be straightforward and uncomplicated. Only later do haunting details reveal that the patient had thus far in life been exerting some form of supernatural force to contain an emotional leviathan. Far below immediate conscious awareness, they hold it down, fearing what would be unleashed upon them if they were to release

it. Other stories, given the brutality of the circumstances in which they were forged and that brought them into my office, appear at first to be ones of insurmountable odds, only to become the grist for the equally surprising development of resilience and joy.

Nevertheless, no matter the circumstances of any story at first telling, one thing that each person shares in common who has done the work that creates lasting change leading to greater love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is that he or she has suffered. This is not to suggest that only these people have suffered. For it is fair to say that to be human is to suffer. We all do.

However, what sets these persons apart is that they have, to a person, developed a relationship with suffering in which they do not intentionally invite it into their lives but neither do they reject it. They have come to understand that they cannot escape suffering in life, so they no longer attempt to escape it. They neither deny it nor become overwhelmed by it. Rather, they learn to be with it and acknowledge that it is with them.

But many discover that their suffering has taken up residence in the deepest places of their souls. Like many of us, they have adapted mechanisms to survive in the world of their families of origin, which they then carry on in their current relationships. To adapt, they had to bury their suffering so far below the surface that they were barely aware of its presence. Hence, to be present to and be with their suffering, they must go to the deepest places of their lives.

They do not develop this capacity—this gift, if you will—of hospitality toward their suffering without having to pass through anger, resentment, and sometimes even despair.

Indeed, to be *with* suffering, one will become well acquainted with it. This will entail becoming familiar with all of the emotional and physical manifestations that their suffering comprises—and then purposefully naming those manifestations to willing listeners who are fully present with the sufferer in the process.

Effectively naming their suffering is crucial. The ability to transform their suffering and be transformed by their experience of suffering directly correlates to the degree to which, over time, they are deeply, truly known by others in the face of it. Through these witnesses, they sense the presence of Jesus—whose body mitigates our suffering in ways that are as mysterious as they are real. As we will see, through this relational process they learn what it means to become people of hope—hope that itself circles back around to become integral to—if not the center of—that very transformational process.

Moreover, these individuals learn that hope is, perhaps surprisingly, something one *forms*. It does not plop into our laps out of the sky. It is not determined solely by our constitution or temperament. It is not optimism. And as we will see in the course of this book, it is something that only ever becomes durable through the course of suffering.

It is through the development of deeply connected relationships that they come to discover that suffering is, counterintuitively, one of the key features of our world that God uses to bring about the lasting transformation that we who follow Jesus claim that we want in our lives.

This is not the posture toward suffering that the world generally holds. Both Eastern and Western metaphysics tend to see suffering as something that needs to be either eradicated

or escaped.¹ Which, on the surface of things, makes sense. Who would, under any circumstances, choose to suffer for its own sake?

In the world in which many of us believe we live—one in which either God doesn't exist, or if he does, he certainly doesn't care about the enormity of the suffering we endure—the only way to understand suffering would be as a painful, meaningless reality of what it means to be human. It must also, of course, be said that doing what we can to reduce or eliminate suffering as we are able has been, and continues to be, an undeniably noble venture. Even the hint that suffering might serve a purpose that is not merely helpful but *necessary* in the redemption of the world evokes, emotionally and culturally, virtually anaphylactic responses.

However, for people who are serious about durable transformation, they eventually develop a very different relationship with suffering from the allergic one described above. They have discovered that, in the relational economy of the God of the Bible, suffering serves, in part, a redemptive role like no other human experience. Not that this makes suffering a good thing in and of itself. Rather, this experience that we avoid and find so heinous offers the very catalyst through which the God of the Bible brings forth the new creation of beauty and goodness.

Amazingly, he transforms the very people who are wracked by suffering. In fact, he not only uses suffering as a means of redemption but, in so doing, redeems suffering itself. How is this possible to imagine, let alone realize in our bodies of bone and blood?

To do that—to imagine and engage suffering as the way of redemption—is the purpose of this book. Mind you, it does not

seek to reveal new ways to respond to suffering never before considered. Indeed, nothing is new under the sun, and much has been written and lived by people far wiser and more familiar with suffering than I am.

My simple desire, rather, is to remind us of what has been understood for three millennia or more about the nature of suffering and that the way forward is through it—not around it—all within relationships. Reintroducing ourselves to the nature of relationships in the context of suffering can transform not only our relationships but our experience of suffering as well.

The primary vehicle that will carry us in our journey will be the first five verses of the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the church at Rome. Paul writes as one who is unsurprised, even perhaps expectant, that suffering is naturally a part of the church body's life together. As I mentioned above, modern people do not live as if suffering is the norm, to be expected. We think it an anomaly in the universe, a wrinkle in the matrix. Paul and the people of the early Jesus movement knew better. For they knew the world as it really was. As it really is. A world in which suffering is to be anticipated—and to which followers of Jesus are to respond accordingly.

It is my intention that as this book unfolds, you will be drawn in by the progression of Paul's words and will come to discover what my patients who are doing the hard work of living have also discovered: through suffering we form hope. Durable hope. Not the hope that for me is often flimsier than I would like to admit. For indeed, given my life of affluence that affords me a virtually limitless selection of options to distract myself from my pain, I have not often been required

to practice putting in the actual effort required to form hope. Consequently, hope that feels as fragile as mine often isn't really much to put my hope in.

But I assume I am not alone in not having formed durable hope as well as I would have liked. In fact, the culture in which we live has trained us to become increasingly fragile. Research on the development of resilience suggests that successive generations over the last forty years have found themselves less and less able to be hopeful about the future because they lack the interior emotional and relational architecture necessary to do so.²

Sturdy relational architecture grows and is strengthened by first encountering minimal forms of suffering, then gradually tolerating it to greater and greater degrees. In this process of facing and doing hard things, durable hope is realized. We cannot form hope that is able to weather the storms of our lives if we are unwilling to encounter the suffering that today's culture attempts to deliver us from at all costs.

But that isn't all. Just because I read in the Bible that suffering can somehow lead to hope does not make me any more optimistic that it's possible, let alone likely. Such belief is drowned by the other voices that constantly tell me that I should be able to have life how, when, and where I want it. I should not have to suffer, and if I do, the message is clear: there is something wrong with the world that is not doing for me what I deserve.

Fortunately, along with the biblical text, we will also examine the other ways God speaks to us to reveal who he is and how he works in the world, not least when it comes to suffering and hope. Paul informs his readers early in his letter to the

church at Rome that the creation itself tells us of God's power and his nature, and that people have been aware of this from the beginning.³ Part of that good creation includes the way that God has intended our brains, minds, and relationships to work in concert with each other so that we love one another well and create and curate beauty and goodness in the world.

Interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB) is the field of study that draws together findings of various scientific disciplines that have a stake in understanding the nature of a flourishing mind. As a psychiatrist working with patients at the intersection of IPNB and Christian spiritual formation, I have seen how the application of the findings of neuroscience have enriched the comprehension and experience of the biblical texts and enabled us to even more effectively live out the life of wisdom that the Bible calls us to.

It is my intention to weave together the biblical narrative, interpersonal neurobiology, and the stories of the people you will meet—all of which converge in the context of healing relational communities to which I will introduce you. Not only will the resulting tapestry lead us to discover what it means to tolerate suffering, but through the formation of hope we will learn what it means to be transformed by it while bearing witness to how our suffering itself is redeemed.

If you are skeptical or downright incredulous that there is anything hopeful to even be considered, let alone discovered and tactically applied in the presence of our suffering, I want to say that your doubt only makes sense. When we look around at our world, how could one possibly think otherwise and still be considered sane? Each one of us, merely looking at our own life that seems to take so long to change (not to mention the

violence we see all around us), finds the need to cry out, “How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”⁴

Here, I can only bear witness to the work of the Spirit in creating beauty and goodness in the deepest places of suffering and in ways I would not have imagined possible. The lives of people you will meet here evidence these possibilities happening in real time and space. They can happen for you, too, because our hope is ultimately not an abstraction nor is it in our own personal agency to transform ourselves. Rather, hope lies in Another. It is in Jesus, the hope of glory.⁵

And with *that* hope in mind, let’s begin.

Chapter One

JUST FAITH



Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

ROMANS 5:1–5

Max's interminable ruminations, always worrying about never getting it right, never being good enough in his career, had the effect of both sweeping him into the fast track of advancement—because of how hard he worked in response

to his worry—and leading him to accumulate a life of misery along the way.

Carmina was married to a man who, committed as he was to the tenets of their faith, had no commitment whatsoever to being curious about his inner life or his outer harshness that he frequently directed at her in public, leaving her to a life of longing and languishing, trapped in a dry well of sadness and despair.

Edwin's autoimmune arthritic condition had, over twenty years, slowly done everything but kill him. He didn't want to die. But he had a hard time wanting to live.

Karen lost her husband in Afghanistan and her son to a drug overdose. Now she most feared losing her very soul to the subsequent continual pain of loss that she perceived as nearly too much to bear.

Westin's serial infidelities had corrupted everyone and everything around him. The very thought of an intimate relationship, despite his desperate longing for one, only compounded his shame and his fear of that very thing he most longed for. Shame and fear that consumed most of his waking hours.

Paulina had done hard, effective spiritual and emotional work for several years, developing resilience and joy on so many fronts. Why, then, did the old, familiar family story continue to haunt her, blindsiding her at the most inopportune times, leaving her emotionally distraught for days on end?

Time in prison was one thing. Living with the shame of it after being released was worse. What was Garrett to do with the incessant battering his mind had to withstand simply to get from the morning to the night as he tried to forget his past?



To be human is to suffer. Indeed, suffering was at the center of the experiences of each of the people whose stories you just read. It was ultimately, in fact, what prompted and escorted them into my office. Moreover, hope felt desperately out of reach, often perceived as a mirage that evaporated anytime any of them was engulfed with the images and sensations of their affliction. But although it was perceived to be beyond them, hope was not completely out of their visual field, or they would not have been speaking with me in the first place. However, it only flitted through their peripheral vision; suffering—and the attendant story that they were telling about it—most often occupied their direct sight line.

Certainly, each person's suffering is unique to the individual; with a nod to Tolstoy, each of us is unhappy—we suffer—in our own particular way.¹ At the same time, the suffering of those chronicled above shared common characteristics we will explore in detail later in this book. However, beyond our awareness that all suffering shares common attributes, most important is the reality that we *all* suffer, even if we are often quite extraordinarily unaware of it.

As we will eventually see, the question is not *if* we each suffer. It is, rather, *To what degree are we aware of it?* and *How are we in relationship with and responding to it?* These questions reveal not only the story we believe we are living in, but the role that suffering plays in that narrative.

You have chosen to read this book for any number of reasons. You may be one who suffers, and you know it. Or perhaps you know someone else who suffers, and you want to help

them. Or you may be curious about suffering but don't think you encounter it that often or that deeply and have questions about why that is. Perhaps you wonder if the pain you hold qualifies as suffering and want to know if you are permitted to name it as such. In the face of your suffering or that of others, you long to discover and maintain hope, all the while attempting to make sense of the suffering in the process.

But I will tell you why I would likely want to read a book, any book, about suffering. At some level, I am hoping that I will discover how I will be able to suffer less. Less painfully. Less often. I want to know more about suffering so that I can have less of it in my life. Of course, it's okay if I learn some things about it along the way—but again, only if what I learn helps me mitigate it.

If I am going to read a book about suffering and hope, I would anticipate that the first step would be either to understand suffering or, even better, to discover solutions for it, so that at the end of the day in some way I actually won't have to suffer as much as I might otherwise. And therein would lie the hope. Why would I want to read something that would merely validate and reinforce the message, "Yes, you're right. Suffering is hard. End of story." Where is there any hope in that message?

I want to be hopeful. Hopeful that I have agency to diminish my suffering. Because, I admit, I don't easily comprehend how hope and suffering coexist in my mind and life. But one of the things we will learn over the course of this book is that, from the standpoint of the biblical narrative and in light of what we are discovering about neuroscience, suffering—while not God's ideal intention—is a *necessary* element in our becoming our truest, most beautiful, most heaven-ready selves. It is

an unavoidable reality of life. One that God plainly does not fully deliver us from in the time frame we would like, if ever.

Moreover, it is a reality that he seems just as plainly committed to using suffering—for reasons that are a great mystery to me—to transform us into who he wants us to become. However, it remains something that I most often choose to avoid if possible instead of accepting it as having anything to do with becoming who I actually long to be.

All of this is both very hard and very good news. It's easy to imagine why it is hard. But to approach understanding how in any universe it could be good will require what may be a severe overhaul of our imaginations. This book intends to address what is required for us to form deeply embedded, durable hope, not only in the presence of our pain but as a direct result of it.

I make no promise that we will suffer less. But I am confident that we will suffer *differently* and will become even more durably hopeful as a result. Primarily, I expect us to come to see that hope is actually a word that, in the world of interpersonal neurobiology, serves as a proxy for an ever-deepening attachment love with Jesus and the commensurate awareness of God's relational presence of lovingkindness. But more on that later.

To arrive at that place of being securely attached to Jesus in this way, however, our journey, necessarily and somewhat counterintuitively, begins not with suffering itself but rather with what precedes it. For it is often most helpful, when wanting to understand a “problem,” to begin at the beginning. And perhaps at a place that may surprise us.

BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

We are people who encounter the world first through our senses. We eventually develop the capacity to *think about* our world, but we first *encounter* our world as sensing beings. Hans Urs von Balthasar sheds significant theological and philosophical light on this. His work provides significant theological grounding for apprehending what neuroscience reveals to us about the general pattern of brain function.² Later I will introduce you to the notion of how suffering has to do with our perception of time, particularly how we perceive and anticipate our future.

We expect our future to reflect what we most long for—and those deep longings commence at birth. Hence, one way to consider suffering is as the severe, painful frustration of our desires. I don't typically imagine that being able to stand up from my chair in a single, smooth motion would be one of my deepest desires. But when my lower back seizes and I am unable to stand without great pain and only with careful movement, I am thrust into a situation in which I desire nothing more desperately than to be able to move without pain. Here we see how suffering emerges as a function of thwarted desire, even ones we have little awareness of having. But long before those desires are frustrated, they are formed in the earliest stages of development.

From the time we are born, we initially *sense* the world—both inside and outside our skin—and only then do we begin to perceive and give meaning to what we are sensing. In this way, first we sense, and then we make sense of what we sense.³ This follows the axiom that the brain, in general, operates from

bottom to top and then right to left, meaning that we generally receive input sensations through our spinal cord or our cranial nerves, all of which first lead to the lower parts of our brains.

When it comes to neural impulses coming from our limbs, what we sense on one side of the body (a pinprick, pain, or cold) sends signals to the opposite side of the brain. Signals from my right side travel eventually to my left brain and vice versa. When it comes to what I sense *inside* my body, the nervous system operates somewhat differently. After ascending to the lower brain, these impulses mostly travel to the right hemisphere and from there travel across the corpus callosum to the left hemisphere, where the combined work of the right and left prefrontal cortices enable us to “make sense” of what we initially “sense.”⁴

Granted, even this oversimplified description is important to keep in mind as we approach the topic of suffering and move closer and closer to hope. When it comes to suffering, before we “make sense” of it, we first must address what, exactly, we are sensing.

This process of the mind, considering the brain’s bottom-to-top and right-to-left neural connectivity, eventually culminates in the development of the middle prefrontal cortex, the physical locale that is most highly correlated with what emerge as uniquely human abilities. But for this dimension of our physical development to emerge into what we describe in the terms of interpersonal biology as an integrated life, a flourishing life, it requires the context of a secure attachment between the child and his or her parent.⁵

Developing secure attachment is itself the interpersonal neurobiological process by which we are primed to be receptive

to what Moses and Jesus described—to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength—as well as what is described in Paul’s letter to the Galatians as a life bearing the fruit of the Spirit.⁶ Moreover, secure attachment is the relational vehicle by which hope begins to form in us as children and continues to develop throughout our lives.

Attachment is the embodied and relational dance between child and parent in which “hope” as an abstract, cognitively imagined “thing” eventually emerges as something the child can *think about*. This is possible only after the child has experienced enough emotional outcomes enabling them to feel seen, soothed, safe, and secure (collectively known as the 4 S’s),⁷ not least in the presence of difficult situations. Through these experiences, he or she begins to anticipate a future of comfort and confidence. In other words, the child first must develop a predictable, durable *sense* of things that enables her to anticipate a future of goodness before she *thinks about* her future as one that is hopeful.

Keeping all of this in mind, we now turn to the initial phrase of Romans chapter 5, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith . . .” In this case, to be justified—to be the recipient of God’s justification—is essentially, as N. T. Wright indicates, to hear from God that we are “in the right” or in good standing with him.⁸

In essence, we hear him say, “I love you and want to be with you and have you be with me in our family. Jesus’s faithful actions are the embodied demonstration of that. *And* it is up to you to trust me that this is true by living as if it’s true.” God declares that in and through the faithful work of Jesus as Messiah, we are being welcomed into his family, invited

to have a seat at his table—and our faith, our *trust*, in God’s promise that this is true is the necessary mechanism, or conduit, by which we actively receive it.⁹ God has offered what we could never imagine, let alone offer ourselves—and we must be receptive to it. And therein lies the rub.

Some of us have heard or read this text in Paul’s letter to the Romans so often that it may not penetrate any further than our mind’s assent to having read some words on a page. For when it comes to “faith,” we often imagine it primarily as a theological concept, one having to do with the world of cognitive assent. I “believe” tends to mean that I affirm, in the way I rationally think, that something is “true.” Such as that one plus one equals two, that Columbus is the capital of Ohio, or that the world is round (or so I have been told). But this would be taking in Paul’s meaning with only a part of our mind and not with the most significant functional element.

As with any relationship, our relationship with God begins and is maintained via the process of attachment described above. Spiritual director Anne Halley puts a finer point on the dance between parents and their children and then, eventually, between adults in all sorts of relationally intimate settings, when she describes secure attachment as the process by which the newborn, infant, and child becomes increasingly aware of and attuned to the awareness and attunement of their parent directed toward them with lovingkindness.¹⁰ This highlights how attachment is, necessarily and primarily, an *embodied* encounter.

For example, consider the social engagement system (SES). The SES is a complex constellation of neural networks that each of us is born with but that is immature at birth. This

system activates multiple physical and emotional responses (e.g., facial expression, emotional tone, body language, tone of voice, physical touch, and perception of the parent's intention, to name a few) and enables a child and parent to interact in such a way that the child grows in his capacity to tolerate distressing emotional states.

The SES grows in maturity over time through ongoing interactions with the parent in which the parent is attuned to the mind of the child in ways that grow the child's emotional resilience. We each have a particular capacity to tolerate distressing affect. This capacity is described as one's window of tolerance (WOT). Growth in emotional and relational maturity is therefore measured in terms of the widening of one's WOT, another way of describing the growth of one's emotional resilience.¹¹

The SES is one example, via our embodied and relational minds, of *how* we actually develop the capacity to "trust" in the first place. Before we can "trust" or "have faith in" God, we first must practice and strengthen our mind's capacity to trust at all. Again, "trust" or "faith" is a word that represents most primally an interpersonal, embodied interaction in which we are being ever more deeply known and thereby loved.

We often limit what we call "faith" or "faith in God" to a rational, cognitive assent to a set of abstract principles, ones that could be found in the Apostles' Creed, for example. I say I trust God when in fact what I mean is that I trust in a rational collection of cognitive beliefs. This is much like believing the fact that airplanes can fly because I have read about it or seen them do so. But God desires for us to board the plane in order for us to become airborne.

This in no way diminishes the role of the creeds nor our use of rational cognition when it comes to our relationships. It merely places them in their proper sequence. There are many times, in fact, when I must use logical, linear cognitive processing to guide my sensing, embodied states of mind in the direction I want them to go. But our relationships do not begin as, nor are they maintained *primarily* as, a function of the mind's capacity for abstract thinking.

The early construction of hope and our eventual capacity to endure suffering must first be grounded in materially real relationships—ones that begin with our primary attachment figures and then extend to God as we encounter him—relationships that we sense in our embodied experience and that are not limited merely to a set of cognitive principles.

At this point I'd like to invite you to pause and direct your attention to what you perceive your embodied responses to be when you consider what it means to "trust" God. Your embodied responses are what you sense in your body upon imagining Jesus telling you, "Indeed, it is finished. It's all done. All those things that we both know keep you from receiving my love for you—I'm not paying attention to them. I'm paying attention to you. And I want you to only pay attention to me. I want you at my banquet. I want you sitting right next to me and to the others who I know can't wait to sit next to you when they see you. I would love for you to believe me—that it's all true."

How difficult is it to receive that? What do you sense, imagine, feel, think, and want to do physically in response to hearing Jesus say this? Moreover, were you to imagine such an encounter, could you receive it as having represented something genuine, something real that has taken place in the real

world? Or since we have come to believe that if we are imagining something “in our minds” then it could not possibly “exist” as a real event in the real world, would you dismiss it?

We have been trained by many cultural forces over the last five hundred years to believe that if something can’t be measured in material terms, if it is limited to the “imagination,” then it can’t be “real.” But you know that just because you can’t see your friend sitting before you and can only imagine their face and the sound of their voice in your mind, they are not merely imaginary.

What are we to do with findings of research that demonstrate how athletes and musicians can enhance their performance on the court or in the concert hall by repeatedly practicing those very actions *in their imaginations*?¹² They are effectively shifting their embodied responses in certain contexts (the athletic court and the concert hall) by wiring their brains to anticipate that very scenario. In this way, their brains—from which emerge the functional feature of their imaginations and their conscious awareness of them—and then, by extension, the actions they take as a result are essentially on a continuum, connected as they are within their bodies and to the intentionality of the musician or athlete.

Similarly, who of your friends could tell you how they feel about you and you would live, at least for the next few hours, as if you believed them? As if what you felt in your chest was *real*. On more occasions than I can tell you, people have told me how much I mean to them, how much they love me, only for their words and presence to vanish like vapor from my mind the moment they are no longer in my sight.

I am left with only the memory of what they have said and

what I sensed, imaged (that is, to literally construct a visual image in my mind), felt, and thought as they said it—and often the memory is not durable enough for me to sustain the same felt sense of their affection for me which I had for that brief moment. Hence, I have to *practice*—literally—bringing those moments to memory over and over in order for them to become embedded not only in my cognitive recollection but in my embodied sensations, feelings, and images as well.

In this way, by practicing with real, embodied relationships in my here-and-now life, I am granted what it gets close to being like when I imagine Jesus coming for me in the same way. This is how the body of Jesus works, and it is why Paul's words of us being Jesus's *body*, and not merely his followers or his church, capture everything that we are to become for each other and the world. And it is why hope is first given life in the context of securely attached, physically remembered relationships rather than being merely a function of our cognition.

Michael, one of my patients, had what he considered to be a long-standing relationship with God, which was not untrue. It was equally true that God was *something* that he mostly thought *about*. God was less *someone with whom* Michael had a relationship. His perceived, sensed awareness of God's *presence* remained further out of his reach than he wanted, than he so deeply hungered and thirsted for.

He was able to speak genuinely of his longing to love and be loved by God. Moreover, he was acutely aware of how deeply his current life circumstances and the emotionally overwhelming nature of them made it virtually impossible for him to access a sense of God's love, despite his deeply held, cognitive conviction of its reality. His suffering was plainly evident, as his

medical condition and the stresses of his unforgiving work setting occupied the forefront of his mind.

He was able to accept in theory the notion that secure attachment—to be seen, soothed, safe, and secure (the 4 S's)—is important. But how was he to realize what seemed outside of his capacity to imagine, let alone put into practice?

Michael desperately longed for hope—what emerges, as we will see, as our anticipated future as a function of secure attachment. And I was confident that he would eventually realize it and do so in even more durable ways than he had been before entering into psychotherapy with me.

One way to approach this possibility is through the work accomplished within a confessional community. These are ongoing groups of patients, usually six to eight in number, that are facilitated by two of our therapists whose purpose is to enable group members to tell their stories more truly. They ultimately do the work of spiritual formation using the tools of group psychotherapy dynamics and principles of IPNB, all of which are informed by an understanding of life as shaped by the biblical narrative.¹³

When Michael became a member of one of these groups at our practice, the therapists and other group members were curious about how and where he sensed things as he navigated moments of emotional vulnerability. During the course of his work in the community, he first began to practice reimagining encounters of empathy and even difficult confrontations. He eventually grew to tolerate and even welcome these interactions with the other members, all of which were largely navigated with care and kindness.

There came a point at which we invited him to imagine

Jesus joining the rest of the community in his imagination—taking, as it were, the community with him, Jesus included, into those moments in which he needed to know he was not alone. It was a revelation to him that, prior to this, he had rarely attuned to these very sensations, images, and feelings when he encountered God in prayer (or if he did, he never understood them to be “real”).

But when he began to practice imagining his entire mind’s experience being revealed to Jesus—as he was regularly doing in the confessional community—he was able to have an embodied encounter with Jesus. All of the compassion and serious care that Jesus offered to Michael in those moments effectively regulated Michael’s distress cycle—what he sensed, imaged, or felt.

In this way, Michael had an *embodied encounter* with the *body* of Christ as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 12. We have become disconnected enough from the material world that we often limit, albeit unconsciously, to sheer metaphor what Paul refers to and assumes to be the body of Christ. (I use the word “nonconscious” to denote those activities of the mind that we are not aware of, which could be any number of things. And I use it rather than the more commonly used “unconscious,” the technical term coined by Sigmund Freud that referred to a particular psychoanalytic domain of the mind. My use of the word “nonconscious” is more inclusive than what Freud was referring to.)

Yes, the body metaphor truly reflects who we are and what we are to be, but the notion of us being literally, materially one *body* is not easy for us to fully appreciate or appropriate. This is merely one way in which we do not attune to the seriousness

with which the Trinity takes us as his church and intends for us—in *our very bodies*—to convey the presence of Jesus to each other and to the world. Apart from our assent to it as a theological abstraction, we have limited attunement to God’s attunement to us.

Michael came to trust—to *have faith*—in Jesus by trusting his embodied sensations and perceptions that he practiced in the community—Jesus’s very body. He made the connection between his experience in the community and the way it primed him to have the encounter with Jesus that he did. In this way, he came to make sense of what it means *in the material world* to be “justified by faith.”

He did not simply cognitively assent to this as a posited theological notion. Rather, in this very concrete, embodied fashion, Michael’s *faith* (sensed, imaged, felt, thought, and behaved/embodied trust) in God’s *declaration that in Jesus’s death and resurrection all has been made right and Michael is wanted and welcome in God’s family* (justification) was becoming ever more grounded in the material world. This was his embodied process of attachment. His encounter with and receptivity to the community opened the door for him to trust with all of his mind—his entire embodied and relational self—that God had “justified” him and made “justification” a lived—and living—phenomenon for Michael.

Hope—the future state of time that our minds long to occupy—must begin with a relationally grounded, material experience with Jesus mediated through the Spirit, the Scriptures, and, often most powerfully, his body. We become increasingly receptive, experientially and thereby theologically, to our having been justified—declared free of our guilt

and shame and welcomed into God's family—to the degree that we encounter that justification in an embodied fashion, one in which we are ever living into earned secure attachment.¹⁴ Upon this taking place, the prospect of hope—even in the presence of suffering—begins to form in our minds.

But evil never rests. And the next chapter reminds us not only that this is so but also that so much of our attention is frequently and unconsciously drawn, not to God's declaration of joy over us, but to something very much its opposite.

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