

Breaking Apart

Struggle | Discernment | Prayer

Embark on a profound journey from despair to faith as this article explores Br. Lucas's battle with internal strife, nihilism, and the transformative power of encountering God. Delve into the heart of Christian discernment and the art of prayer, discovering a narrative that weaves together personal struggles into a beautiful mosaic of spiritual awakening.

It was November 2011 when I began to plan my suicide.

No particular event prompted it. My grandmother had recently died, which was sad, but not unexpected, and she had lived a long life. I had, just a few weeks prior, lost a local election, but I never really expected to win; I was thrilled that I simply hadn't come in last place, that I'd convinced thousands of real-life people with jobs and lives to vote for me. To be honest, the personal and professional busyness was probably a distraction from the deeper problem.

Eventually, I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety (like many of us), and I took pills, and they worked well, and I basically agree with the diagnosis. But leaving it there doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel true to what I lived. I certainly experienced depression and anxiety to a degree that would register on a clinical level, but I do not think that's the full story. I'm convinced that these were the psychological damages wrought by a deeper, fundamental problem.

I felt awash, adrift, and alone, isolated from people, from the world around me, from any sort of meaning or purpose. Everything was consumed by an unshakable nihilism, a beholding of the world and seeing a bunch of stuff happening, much of it awful, all of it chaotic, and none of it seeming to point to any coherent meaning. And this nihilism sprung from a particular philosophy, involving but not limited to a disdain for religion, wrapped up in a heavy, heavy individualism. This perspective was somehow the apotheosis of the free human being: no gods, no masters, no bonds unbroken, no fetters to impede the possibility of it all. There was a cold, heady rush to it, which was deeply alluring to a young man with an active mind and an attraction to argumentation.

And yet, rather than making me feel free, this viewpoint left me so isolated that I wanted to die – not to hurt myself or to stick it to others; simply, to slip the bonds of an existence I found so devoid of meaning. This was not resolved until I was brought so low, so desperate, that I began to question my fundamental philosophy, including its disdain for religion. Striving after and encountering God – a God simultaneously with relational personhood and identified with the principle of existence itself (“I am that I am,” explains Yahweh to Moses); a God simultaneously transcendent Alpha and Omega and immanent Christ in-the-flesh – was for me the necessary antidote to that corrosive nihilism.

Finding this God, and this faith, solved the problem. But, of course, it didn’t solve the problems. This is not some story about how everything was made better and perfect and lovely because I found religion. I was – I am – still prone to experience the strife of any living person, strife both internal and external. This strife can lead to places of extreme pain and loss, even to the point of death. My encounter with God, and my cultivating of that relationship, was vital to my surviving that strife. But the clamor did not cease. God did not just give me perfect clarity, calm, and contentment to serenely abide in the midst of trouble, blissfully unaware of the chaos around or within me. Of course, the Father did not give the Son this, either, and if we are to walk that Way of Christ, we will need to pick up and face the strife again. The path we are called to walk is not away from strife, but through it. We must take up our cross, put on the mind of Christ, and keep stepping forward.

If we wish to talk about the strife of our communities, cultures, and societies, I believe we need, at some point, to talk about the strife people endure internally.

Inward Strife

If we wish to talk about the strife of our communities, cultures, and societies, I believe we need, at some point, to talk about the strife people endure internally. Ideas of social sin have become justifiably more popular in some Church circles, but without a connection to something inward, it risks becoming a simple political agenda. The Letter of James describes this well: “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it, so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.”

I think a corollary idea here is that the heart of sin is fear, and specifically, the fear that a desire will go unmet. God is regularly described as a God of provision, in whom we can trust. When we begin not to trust in that provision, we seek to seize things for ourselves. This inappropriate seizure is a reasonable way to describe most individual acts we call sin, whether it's around food, money, sex, power, acclaim, or anything else. The twin maladies of vainglory and despair are mirror images of each other, and like many paired ideas, are only a brief distance apart. Vainglory places us at the pinnacle where we ourselves are the provider in whom we trust. But a pinnacle is a precarious place to stand, and when we inevitably tumble down, despair denies any ability to attain what we want or need.

Trust, then, is necessary. How do we attain it? I think it's crucial that we look within ourselves starkly and honestly, again and again, to discern what our desires are, why we may have them, and how they're related to God and the likeness of God that we have been called to grow into. In the gospels, we see Jesus proclaiming things such as "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." We see him lamenting in Gethsemane in one gospel account, while spurning the idea of desiring a different outcome in another. So with Paul, we see a consistent description of conflicting desires, doing what he does not want, failing to do what he does want, desiring God to remove the thorn in his side and not receiving it, so finding a way to boast in that weakness.

We may see these examples simply as the struggle to submit one outcome to the other, the flesh to the spirit. That's a valid way to interpret it. But I believe this risks starting with the conclusion. We know the answers we're supposed to have, so we can tend to jump to them without genuinely struggling and striving. We're left confused that things haven't shifted, that prayer feels dry, or that we're not making the progress we thought we should. Instead of embracing the full logic of the Incarnation - this idea that divinity and humanity, spirit and flesh, do belong together and are reconcilable through the weakness, death, and triumph of the cross - we jump straight to the ending, expecting triumph.

The path we are called to walk is
not away from strife, but through it.

I am reminded of our founder, Richard Meux Benson, and his words to monks about the "lifelong novitiate." The stage of struggling, striving, taking steps forward, and being formed never really stops until the very end. We "graduate" to the next stage only at the end of this life, not before. This approach - which both expects and embraces the lifelong work and struggle of being formed in the image of Christ, of listening to that voice that speaks with the full harmony of divinity and humanity - is the cross to take up daily.

This idea also appears in our Christian understanding of discernment. Fundamental to

the idea of discernment is that we discern between goods. Put another way, if Option A is holy and Option B is sinful, no discernment is needed; pick Option A. Discernment only comes into play if Options A and B are both good, and both can speak with different but holy voices. This might seem daunting - and it can be. But the ability to encounter multiple experiences within ourselves and our encounters with God - to embrace them all and trust that they are reconcilable, even if we can't yet see how - is an exercise of the fundamentals of the Christian faith and of the Christ in whom all things hold together. All things - even you.

Becoming Whole

I have noticed something about my own prayer. When I don't pray, I feel easily distracted, caught up in one thing or another, fixated on things in ways that are not always helpful. The thoughts can become picky, nagging, or consuming. They distract from God. But when I do pray, and tend to that prayer wholeheartedly, I begin to see new treasures of God in everything - even the struggles. No longer nagging inconsistencies, they become the distinct little pieces of glass making up the stained-glass window, the little broken pottery tiles that make up the mosaic. They have their own shapes and textures, but they build a broader whole. They do not do this by sacrificing their individuality, but the skillful artist - in the case of prayer, God - orients them in such a way that their distinctiveness builds on one another, until a vision more glorious appears, and the many voices of the choirs of heaven, though dim, might be heard.

For Further Reflection

How does your inner life and experience impact your view of God?

Think of the most significant instances of prayer, or awareness of God, in your life. What were you feeling or thinking in those moments, or in the time leading up to them?

How do you cultivate and express faith in your life, independent of emotional or intellectual highs and lows?

Discover SSJE:

Daily



Brother, Give Us A Word: a daily monastic practice.

Receive brief meditations from Brothers of SSJE, sent every morning via email. Sign up at [SSJE.org/word](https://ssje.org/word).

Weekly



Sermons: Sunday messages based on the lectionary to inspire your prayer.

We hope to offer a still point in the midst of the chaos of contemporary life. Go to [SSJE.org/sermon](https://ssje.org/sermon).

Regularly



Retreats & Spiritual Direction: for your renewal.

We offer retreats and workshops for individuals and groups throughout the year. Go to [SSJE.org/visit](https://ssje.org/visit).

Seasonally



Cowley Magazine: longform essays to deepen your faith.

Cowley is published seasonally in print and online. Read the latest at [SSJE.org/cowley](https://ssje.org/cowley).