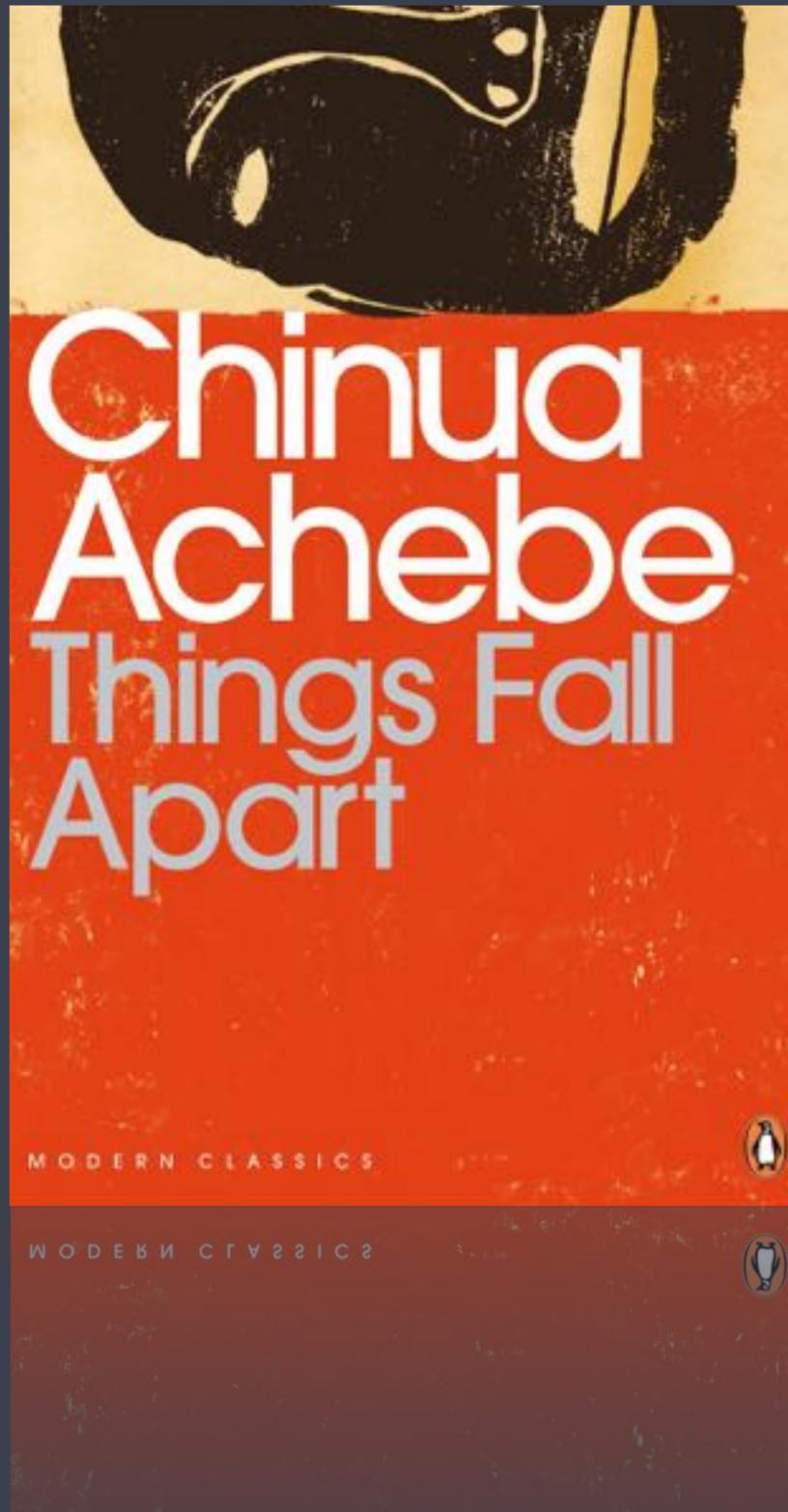


THE SHAPE OF HUMAN FLOURISHING AND SUFFERING

What the Psalms Offer Us



THINGS FALL APART

- *Chinua Achebe*

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer:
Things fall apart, the center cannot hold,
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

– W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, **a teller of stories that aspire to truth** ... I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"

– Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 201

WORDS FAIL

Violence creates in human beings a kind of cognitive breakdown that is as neurological and physical as it is emotional and intellectual. Persons or communities marked by such violence often **lose their capacity to make sense of their world**, to impose order on it.

– Serene Jones, “Soul Anatomy”: Calvins’ Commentary on the Psalms,” in *Psalms in Community*, 272

Further, survivors of traumatic violence often get caught in a kind of **time warp** where the violence that unhinges their world is forever reenacted in their present-day attempts at meaning-making: **intrusive memories of the violence inform all that they do.**

– Serene Jones, “Soul Anatomy”: Calvins’ Commentary on the Psalms,” in *Psalms in Community*, 272-73

The multiple traumas of the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries have produced a sense of futility among those with a vocation in language. **Violence has a way of making a mockery of words.** After Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, all the words sound hollow. What does one say after a televised beheading? The proclamation of God's justice or God's love meets a wall of resistance first in the throat of the proclaimer, then in the ears of the hearer.

– Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, 5

Why is it that when we enter life's deep places—a friend's betrayal, a challenging or dangerous job, the death of a child—we so often feel at **a loss for words**...

– Lischer, *The End of Words*, 9

And yet **the soul in extremity craves language**; and even more than that, craves within language some fixed point of perception, some articulation of soul and circumstance that neither wavers nor decays, some—how the modern mind pretzels itself trying not to speak this one word—truth.

– Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 127

People who are suffering do not have much in the way of language ... The language victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else.

– Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 94

POETS SPEAK

Poetry has its uses for despair. It can carve a shape for pain; it can give one's loss a form and dimension that it might be loss and not simply a hopeless haunting. It can do these things for one person, or it can do them for an entire culture.

– Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 149

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark. I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.

VANITY OF VANITIES
ALL IS VANITY

When someone complains—as do some of those who attempt or commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that **it lacks any point, any movement towards a climax or a *telos*.** Hence the point of doing any one thing rather than another at crucial junctures in their lives seems to such a person to have been lost.

– MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 202

THE EXPERIENCE OF
BRYAN MAGEE

The realization hit me like a demolition crane that I was inevitably going to die As in a nightmare, I felt trapped and unable to escape from something that I was also unable to face. Death, my death, the literal destruction of me, was totally inevitable ... **I found this fact un-comeable-to-terms-with.**

– Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher*, 228

In the face of death I craved for my life to have some meaning. I found the thought that it might just mean nothing at all—might, in a long perspective, be nothing at all—terrifying.

– *Confessions*, 229

I used to look at people going about their normal lives with everyday cheerfulness and think: "How can they? And how can they suppose that any of what they're doing matters? They're like passengers on the Titanic, except that these people know already that they're headed for total and irremediable shipwreck.

– *Confessions*, 253

Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realization of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink. Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Gary Jules

Mad World

To say that there is nothing beyond this world that we see, to make death the final authority of our lives, is to sow a seed of meaninglessness into that very insight . . . **Remove futurity from experience and you leach meaning from it** just as surely as if you cut out a man's past.

– Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 10, 56

DEFIANCE!

I AM THE CAPTAIN OF MY SOUL

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

– Ernest Henley “Invictus”

On the radio I hear a famous novelist praising his father for enduring a long, difficult dying without even "seeking relief in religion." It is clear from the son's description that the father was in absolute despair, and that as those cold waters closed over him he could find nothing to hold on to but his pride, and drowned clutching that nothing.

This is to be admired? That we carry our despair stoically into death, that even the utmost anguish of our lives does not change us? How astonishing it is, the fierceness with which we cling to beliefs that have made us miserable, or beliefs that prove to be so obviously inadequate when extreme suffering—or great joy—comes.

– Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 7-8

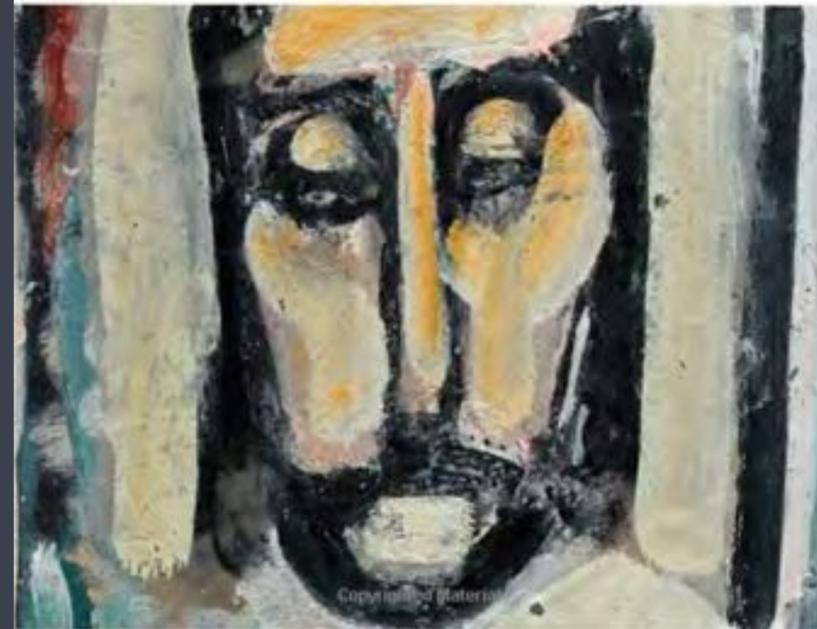
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The
WOUNDED HEALER

Ministry in Contemporary Society

In our own woundedness, we can become a source of life for others

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN



THE WOUNDED HEALER

- Henri Nouwen

PSALM 23 IN
PALE RIDER

Because of copyright laws, the following movie segment has not been included.

It is a five-minute segment from the Clint Eastwood movie, "Pale Rider (43:06 - 47:55)." As Professor Saleska notes, "the clip demonstrates how a person interacts with the psalm in such a way that she is reading herself and using the psalm voice to help her articulate her fears and hopes to God."

PSALM 4 READS AUGUSTINE

Psalm 4:3, "How long will you love vanity and seek a lie?" "I trembled with fear and at the same time burned with hope and exultation at your mercy, Father . . . For I had loved vanity and sought after a lie." As I heard the Psalm, I trembled at words spoken to people such as I recalled myself to have been . . . In the pain felt at my memory of it, I often cried out loud and strong."

– *Confessions IX. 4.9*

As he prays with the psalm's longing for joy in the right things and anger at wrong desire, Augustine makes the psalm his own. The praying of the psalm becomes a therapy for his affections, allowing it to affect not only his knowledge of God but also his deepest feelings toward God.

– Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 116

Everything written here is like a mirror held up to us.

– *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 110

In Augustine's hands this image of the 'mirror' does more work than our ordinary mirrors do. **Scripture does more than show us what is the case about our face** — it directs us, tells us how to feel anew, gathers up our affections and converts them. Augustine's mirror gives us our faces.

– *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 110

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DAMNED

The psalms articulate cries for help, feelings of abandonment, and confession of sins with language that desperate people can relate to.

– Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible With the Damned*, 129

Draw the spear and javelin
against my pursuers;

.....

Let ruin come on them unawares.
And let the net that they hid ensnare them;
Let them fall in it—to their ruin.

– Ps 35:3, 8

PROTEST!
NOT PASSIVE ACCEPTANCE

PSALM 44

In the complaint . . . God is called on in the expectation that he will rescue from trouble. He, who for the moment is being experienced as a dreadful foe, completely incomprehensible and hidden in his harm, is reminded of his earlier help and of how **he presented himself as one who promised to be true and faithful.**

– Oswald Bayer, *God's Omnipotence*, 90

The wrath, the destroying fury of the Creator of all things, the Maker of life in which fury he brutally destroys life, is held before him, bewailed before him in complaint . . . As he ascribes the savage destruction of life that has befallen him to the one to whom he is complaining . . . the one who prays is not seeking any justification of or explanation for these dire circumstances.

– Oswald Bayer, *God's Omnipotence*

He will not simply accept that which has befallen him by resigning himself finally and entirely to some wise and reasonable providence Rather, the one who prays, the one who laments and complains, manifests precisely his lack of understanding for that which he is experiencing, and thus asks, "Why?" (Ps. 22:1). It is precisely his impatience that we see manifested as he asks: "How much longer?" (Ps. 13:1). The reality is unintelligible, and he calls it into question. Rebellion and resistance—not resignation!

– Oswald Bayer, *God's Omnipotence*

LIFE IN THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE

Western societies have fallen into the "Flaw of the Excluded Middle" whereby we talk about the secular things of this world and the [story] of salvation history, but neglect to address the intersect between everyday life and the spiritual.

– Glenn Fluegge summarizing Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 189-201

EXAMPLES

Blessed is the one who considers the poor!
In the day of trouble the Lord delivers him;
The Lord protects him and keeps him alive;
He is called blessed in the land;
You do not give him up to the will of his enemies.
The Lord sustains him on his sickbed;
In his illness you restore him to full health.

– Ps 41:1-3

May the Lord give you increase,
You and your children
May you be blessed by the Lord
Who made heaven and earth
The heavens are the Lord's heavens,
But the earth he has given to the children of man.

– Ps 115:15-16

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
On those who hope in his steadfast love
That he may deliver their soul from death
And keep them alive in famine.

– Ps 33:18-19

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

– Ps 32:4

Oh taste and see that the Lord is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints,
For those who fear him have no lack!
The young lions suffer want and hunger;
But those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

– Ps 34:8-10

PSALM 31

In Psalm 31, there is a wonderful verse towards the end of the psalm and it sort of described my situation: "Blessed be the Lord, for He has made marvelous His lovingkindness to me in a besieged city. As for me, I said in my alarm, "I am cut off from before your eyes, "nevertheless, you heard the voice of my supplications when I cried to you."

ATTENTION TO
PRAISE

I love the Lord
for he hears my voice, my pleas
for he turns his ear to me
whenever I call.

.....

You have delivered me from death,
My eyes from tears
My feet from stumbling.
I shall walk before the Lord
In the lands of the living.

– Psalm 116:1-2, 8-9

I thought of [praise] in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise . . . the world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars.

- C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 93-94

The healthy and unaffected man, even if luxuriously brought up and widely experienced in good cookery, could praise a very modest meal: the dyspeptic and the snob found fault with all ... praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.

– *Reflections*, 94

I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it . . . The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about.

– *Reflections, 94-95*

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation ... the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.

– *Reflections*, 95

... the word of Christ's death and resurrection is properly spoken only by one who is materially embedded in all the dying and rising that occurs on a daily basis in ministry.

– Lischer, *The End of Words*, 10

[Ministers] are each called to be the wounded healers, the ones who must not only look after their own wounds, but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others. They are both wounded ministers and healing ministers.

– Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 88

Ministers are called to speak to the ultimate concerns of life: birth and death, union and separation, love and hate. **They have an urgent desire to give meaning to people's lives.**

– Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 88

CONCLUSION

The Psalms are the words of Christ. Christ is the Word (*logos*) made flesh. Because Jesus calls himself the Word made flesh ... we take him at his word. We do not rewrite or revise God's word. Rather, **we live it.**

We live it when it fills us with joy. We live it when we are frightened. We live it in his grace. We live the word and it endures through each personal trial and each disappointment. **We live the word and it endures** through the faithful presence of God's Holy Spirit working through us.

– Rosaria Butterfield, *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, 93-94