



Life Without Suffering

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Byron Katie, author of *A Mind at Home with Itself*, reflected in a *Voices of Esalen* podcast with host Sam Stern that she experienced a life-changing realization. One morning in 1986, “I discovered that when I believed my thoughts, I suffered, but that when I did not believe them, I didn’t suffer. Freedom is as simple as that. I found that suffering is optional.” This was a startling revelation for a person who admittedly was filled with self-loathing and constantly battled thoughts of suicide.

As I listened to her story, I felt the pain she once experienced. I also experienced the joy that had replaced her pain as a result of her realization. It was inspirational and thought-provoking. I then brought to mind the many members of our SA group who continually suffer because of their thoughts. Their self-loathing is generated by their belief that their thoughts displease God. For them, fear and anxiety are constant. Can people who suffer in this way experience freedom from suffering, as Byron Katie did?

As a man who believes in the power of grace, I must respond to that question with a resounding YES. Not only is it possible, it is also the will of God that people who suffer because of their thoughts be freed. Their intolerable burden is unnecessary and a cross that is not intended to be borne. But grace does not necessarily just fall from the sky. Most of the time, real work and real effort lay the necessary groundwork, the fertile ground for grace to grow and be fruitful.

The real effort to attain the grace-filled experience of freedom that will lead to a life that is free from unnecessary suffering is hard work. It demands that we confront our perceptions and our judgments. It demands that we risk coming face to face with what we fear the most. It often results in a profound sense of a loss of self, which is central to the path to acquire holiness. Jesus identified this struggle as “losing your life in order to save your life.” It means coming to the realization that there are no shortcuts. Each step along the way needs to be fully engaged and fully experienced.



If you suffer with unwanted thoughts, powerful perceived blasphemies, constant sexual distractions, and the emotional residue that is generated by this kind of thinking, one step starts your path to freedom. That first step is difficult to explain and more difficult to take, but I will try to explain it.

One process that can help and be effective begins by setting aside a significant amount of time in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed easily. Once in the quiet place, make yourself comfortable and try and center yourself mentally and emotionally.

Then, acknowledge that you are engaging a spiritual process and that this process will produce uncomfortable feelings and emotions. Plus, acknowledge that your random, powerful, and irritating thoughts likely will be overactive as you engage the process. Take a couple of deep breaths and ask for the Spirit of God to be with you and to strengthen you.

When you feel significantly prepared, respectfully ask yourself these difficult questions: Why does it seem that I believe that out of the billions of human beings—all of whom have thoughts and desires—that my thoughts and desires demand the full attention of God? That of all of the people who live or who have ever lived or who will ever live, somehow I have been singled out by God for this kind of attention. How have my thoughts, no matter how distressful they may be, become so powerful that they offend God?

Once you have honestly pondered this first set of questions, take a deep breath and ask a second set: Is it possible that my thoughts do not offend God? Is it possible, even probable, that the only one offended by my thoughts is me?

At this point, do not take refuge in any definition of sin that you believe applies to you. Do not take refuge in any fear that even thinking about your thoughts must somehow displease God. Most of all, do not take refuge in a desperate attempt to avoid the truth

that will emerge by confusing it with thoughts that are disordered by OCD and your sickness, which are the sources of this kind of suffering.

Once you have done your best to confront this reality and decide on an answer that makes some sense for you, ask yourself if you can accept and embrace the idea that God desires your happiness, God desires your freedom, and God never desires that you suffer in this manner.

If you are unable to engage in this kind of spiritual practice alone, feel free to ask a friend, your spouse, or a spiritual director to be with you as you engage the process. Sometimes being with another person who loves and supports you makes all the difference in the world.

Be mindful also that engaging this spiritual practice might not be a one-time event. It may well require multiple efforts before you can begin to experience some of the grace-filled freedom that will most assuredly result. Be patient with yourself and respect the necessity that the passage of time is essential to the healing process.

One final note. A grace-filled healing does not mean that your unwanted thoughts will disappear. That is one possibility but not the only one. Rather, you can expect that, with the help of grace, you will no longer believe that the unwanted thoughts represent who you are as a person in any way. You can choose not to believe them. You can choose to see them as what they are: unwelcome manifestations of an illness that are constant and unpleasant but that don't define who you are.

These unwanted negative thoughts are to OCD what a persistent cough is to a cold. They are simply symptoms of something other than who you are. You are not a cold; you are a person who has a cold. Big, big, difference. When you embrace this perspective of truth, suffering will begin to disappear, and freedom will be experienced once again. ✨

❖ ***“I found that suffering is optional.”*** ❖

BYRON KATIE, AUTHOR

Christian Living in the Workplace

Being able to forgive hurts caused by others is a needed behavior when working in customer service jobs. People who work in service-oriented jobs often are confronted with customers who seem to view and treat them as nothing more than servants. Some customers do not view those who work in service-oriented positions as equals, or as brothers and sisters. So, customers sometimes treat workers poorly—as if theirs are the only needs that matter. As a result, people working in jobs that require a lot of customer contact sometimes endure customers' irrational, angry outbursts; racist and sexist remarks; and other negative behaviors.

Business owners also must contend with customers' occasional bad behavior. For example, business owners sometimes have to forgive serious infractions, like theft. But the best Christian response to all hurtful behavior that originates with customers resides in the attempt to reach out and build a positive relationship with the offender. Other behaviors—like speaking out to defend oneself or the business—also are legitimate responses when good judgment calls for them.

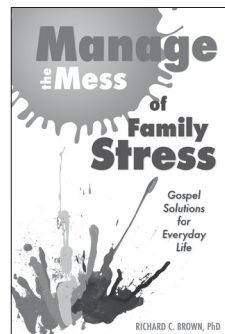
Though some may challenge the use of intellect as a spiritual behavior in the workplace, both logic and theology affirm the need for its presence and use. In fact, the love relationships we have with God and others are a function of the soul, as well as powers of the intellect and will. By its very nature, the life of grace that God gives us assists our intellect and our will. Proper use of the intellect is a central behavior in spirituality. It provides us with the power to arrive at the truth, solve problems, discern what is good and bad behavior before God, and judge how and when to practice servanthood, forgiveness, and speaking out.

Serving the needs of others is the primary behavior of living as a Christian in the workplace. Serving your own needs happens when you choose a job, a career, and a work environment that matches who you are, what you like to do, and your skills and talents.



If you love to socialize, that need is met when you're able to do that day after day where you work. By choosing work that fits your predominant skills and that allows you to do what you most enjoy, you are exercising servanthood toward yourself.

Jesus called us to love ourselves as we love our neighbor. Matching our talents with the needs of the job we are intended to perform is a key step in practicing our Christian faith in the workplace. When we do work we enjoy, the joy and productivity we experience are in alignment with Jesus in Matthew 5:16: "Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father." ✨



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Q. *During the COVID-19 pandemic, most bishops dispensed the Catholic faithful from attendance at Mass on Sunday. How can a bishop—or anyone else, for that matter—dispense a person from a commandment of God: “Remember to keep holy the LORD’s Day.”*

A. Simple. The dispensation is addressed in Church law. The Church made the law, the Church can end the law, and the Church can dispense the faithful from the law. A commandment cannot be dispensed with. You can keep the Lord’s day holy through your choices and decisions. The dispensation was not and could not be a dispensation from the commandment.

Q. *A priest mentioned in a recent homily that there is more than one sacrament of reconciliation. This was news to me. I thought confession was the sacrament of reconciliation. Please explain.*

A. The sacraments of reconciliation are, in normal order of reception, baptism, reconciliation, Eucharist, and the anointing of the sick. With the exception of baptism, which can only be received once, the other sacraments may be received numerous times. The primary manner in which reconciliation is celebrated is in the sacrament of reconciliation (confession), but God’s gift of reconciliation is not limited to one sacrament.



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