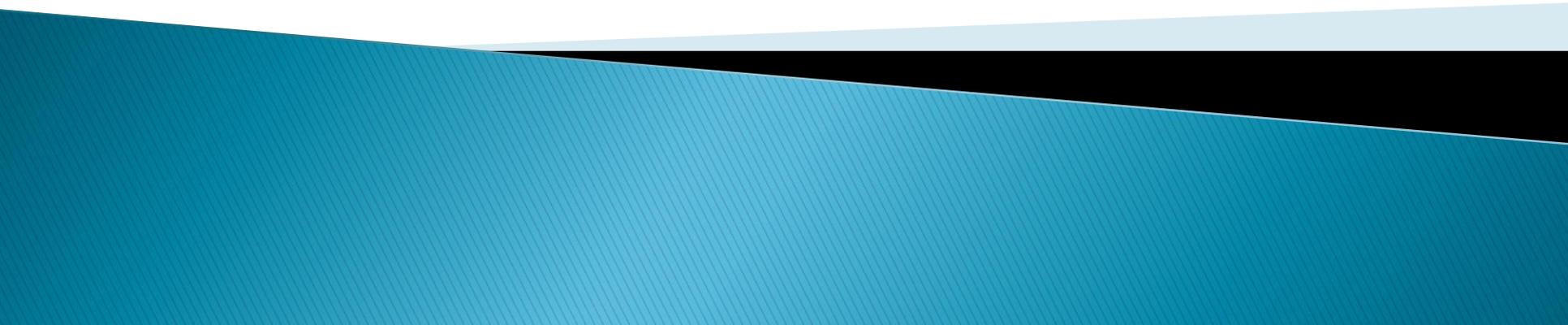


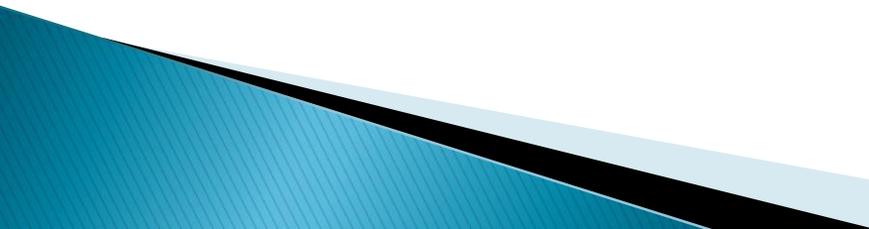
Involuntary Pilgrim on the Via Negativa

Glen R. Horst



- ▶ The title for this session on suffering was inspired by an article by David Guiliano that appeared in the November issue of The United Church Observer. In the article David tells his story about his experience with cancer. The story begins with the return of a tumour that he hoped had been dealt with and that he would never see again. It is a story of pain and suffering as he once again faces a life-threatening health crisis and undergoes medical assessment and treatment; but, more importantly, it is a story of his spiritual odyssey into territory that none of us wants to visit. We're going to use David's story to explore suffering in this session.
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What to do with Involuntary Suffering?

- ▶ Involuntary suffering: victimization (powerless)
 - ▶ Avoid; ignore; escape; rage; weep; despair
 - ▶ Choosing suffering (becoming a pilgrim):
 - Taking on educational, vocational, athletic, business, family/caregiving challenges
 - Moves and transitions
 - Moral choices: doing the right thing, whistle-blowing, justice-making
 - Service: joining with those who are visibly suffering
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- The world is full of suffering: life-limiting illness is just one example of involuntary suffering – also earthquakes, wildfires, floods, wars, bullying and abuse, economic disaster, accidents – it is dished out randomly, unevenly – it is everywhere and it is almost impossible to not experience it in our own lives – and when we do we are likely to feel some sense of being victimized (loss of control, of power over our lives, anger or rage over the unfairness of it all and our helplessness in the face of it)
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- We fear suffering; we hate it; in some deep way many of us carry a sense that we are entitled to live without suffering; that our birthright is happiness and that suffering is the enemy of that birthright. So we turn away from suffering, try to protect ourselves from suffering. When it inevitably enters our lives and knocks us off balance, we may rage, weep, despair. But we also look for ways to regain a sense of control and power (cf. MAID)
- It is interesting though that suffering is frequently chosen (cf. Examples on slide). Points to the fact that suffering can be engaged, that we can journey with suffering; make something out of it; find some meaning in it.

Suffering is natural (part of life)

- ▶ No birth without labour pains
- ▶ Biological, psycho-social, spiritual unfolding of developmental stages brings with it developmental tasks with labour pains
 - painful process of letting go, opening, dreaming, reaching, risking, experimenting,
 - stepping out in trust/faith into our fears of the unknown and the unpredictable
- ▶ No suffering = no birth, no growth
- ▶ Suffering: a signal of something new happening

- The truth is that there is no escaping suffering – it is the pathway of life; it is the gateway through which we must pass to experience new dimensions of life, of ourselves, of relationships, of the world
 - Suffering calls for our attention – something new is happening, life is calling to us and asking something new of us.
 - What is it? What is the meaning of this? What can I do with this? What am I to learn from this? How do we need to love each other differently in the midst of this? What can give us hope when this is happening?
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Via Negativa: the way of darkness, chaos, silence

- ▶ What is suffering?
 - ▶ What may relieve suffering?
 - ▶ What may give meaning to suffering?
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- These are the questions before us this afternoon. They are some of the most confusing, frustrating, unanswerable questions we face as human beings. The suffering we experience and witness in our lives messes with our religious beliefs and feelings.

- How can a just and loving God allow so much suffering in the world?

- If God loves me, why doesn't God remove this suffering from my life?

- If God loves our family, why doesn't God protect us from suffering?

- Why do good people suffer? And not-so-good people often prosper?

- For some these questions are so troubling, they simply can't believe God exists at all – better to not believe in God than to believe in a God who stands by while people suffer.

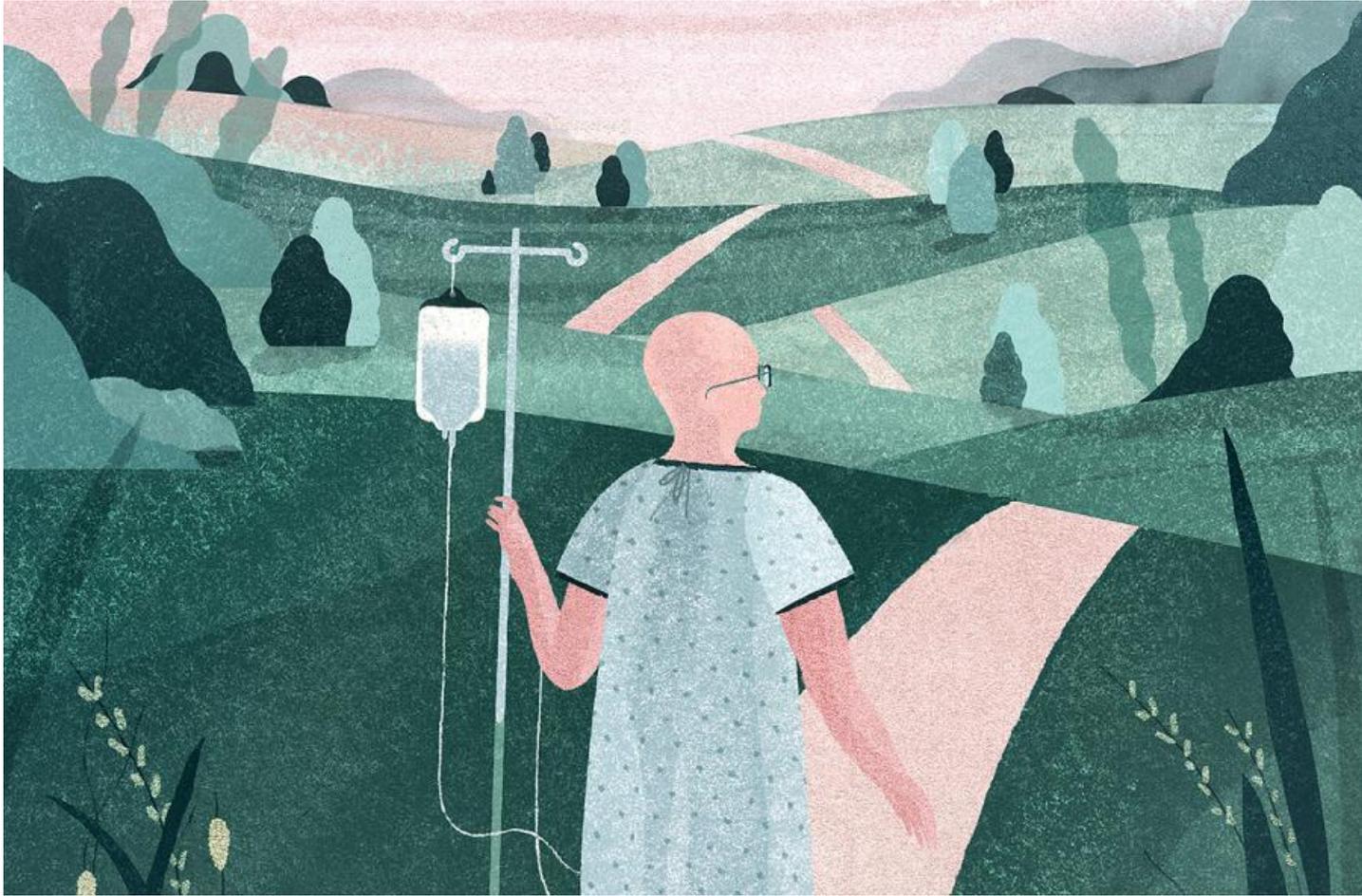
- ▶ We are not going to try to address these questions in an academic or theoretical way or by trying give religious or theological answers to these questions.

- ▶ It's not that the religions of the world do not have answers for suffering. Every religion offers explanations for suffering that are meant to console and guide people in their suffering and to offer hope when times are desperate. It's just that religious answers so often aren't adequate to relieve the desperation and hopelessness of people who are suffering deeply.
- ▶ The answers that religion offers tend to be satisfying mostly to people who are observing suffering from a distance; from arm's length (cf. Job and his friends: "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all. Have windy words no limit? . . . I also could talk as you do , if you were in my place; I could join words together against you, and shake my head at you." 16: 2-4).

Involuntary Pilgrim

David Guiliano; Illustration by Garcia Lam

<http://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2017/11/pilgrim/>



- ▶ The experience of suffering is always personal, always individual (even when it affects other people). It is always shaped by a person's inner emotional and spiritual resources (or lack of them) and by their social context (the amount of support and love they experience in their lives). And if a person finds meaning in their suffering it is unlikely to be the religious meaning that has been handed to them by religious leaders or family and friends or by their surrounding culture. It will be meanings that sprout in the darkness and silence of their suffering, or (to use a different metaphor) that are forged in the fires of suffering.
- ▶ Personal meanings in suffering are hard to come by. They are not obvious or quickly apparent – in fact, they may never become apparent to the one who actually suffers, but may eventually become apparent to people who are around them or continue to live after they have died.

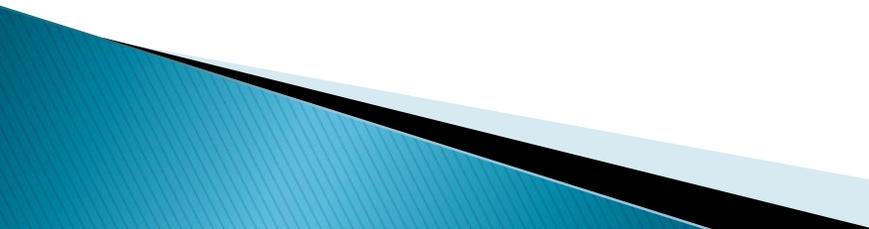
- ▶ Yet, the search for the meaning of our suffering must not be abandoned. To abandon it is to abandon an essential part of our humanity. We are meaning-making creatures and as Viktor Frankl noted when all other sources of meaning have dried up, we still have the capacity to make meaning out of our suffering.
 - ▶ One of the ways that we discover and share the meanings we find in our sufferings is through stories. Our stories are powerful because they are born in our hearts where we struggle with emotional upheaval, with making sense out of what is happening in our lives, and with trying to find a place in our lives for unwelcome events. And so we are going to use David's story to explore the nature of suffering, what relieves suffering, and the search for meaning in suffering. As with all stories David's story is very personal, but precisely because it is personal it has the power to touch us, to remind us of our own experiences of suffering and of the experiences of others that we know and have cared for or cared about.
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Table Groups: Reflecting on David's Story and Our Stories

- ▶ Each person write a completion to at least one of the following:
 - “Suffering is”
 - “Suffering may be relieved by”
 - “Meaning in suffering may come from”
 - ▶ Share your sentence and what it means to you with the group
 - ▶ Put your sentences on the wall.
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