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Study guide

Something new emerges

Reflections from a pastor living with disabilities

By Robert C. Blezard

It's part of our human condition—unexpected, unpredictable, unwanted events that cause us suffering and pain. Maybe the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, a loved one's death, a medical diagnosis, an accident. Hardship disorders our lives, but with God's help we often are able to reorder our lives in ways that bring us unexpected blessings.

EXERCISE 1: BOAST IN OUR SUFFERINGS

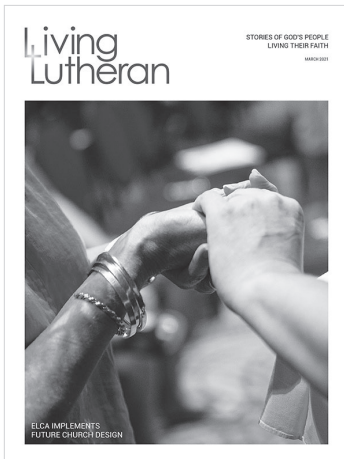
In Romans 5:3-5, the apostle Paul talks about the process through which we can turn suffering into growth: *[W]e also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* Discuss:

- How does suffering produce endurance? Have you ever experienced this? Can you share?
- What is character, and how does endurance produce character? Can you share a time when you witnessed this in someone or experienced it yourself?
- Explain how character produces hope. Have you seen or experienced this? Can you share?
- How would you define hope as Paul describes it in this context? Why does hope not disappoint us?
- What is the connection between the transition of “suffering to endurance, endurance to character, character to hope” and God's love? Between that and the Spirit?
- How might Paul's depiction of the redemptive value of suffering apply in Terrence McCarthy's story?

EXERCISE 2: GRIEF

We experience grief whenever there is a loss in our life, whether minor (you accidentally broke a favorite vase) or major (divorce). Grief is a given for life, but how we cope varies widely. Discuss:

- How would you define grief?
- Why does grief arise with loss?
- How do you experience grief? How do you handle it?



About the study guide author:

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- Can you share an experience of grief associated with a minor loss and how you coped? A major loss?
- What are some healthy strategies for coping with grief? What have you learned in your life?
- What are some unhealthy ways to cope with grief? What have you learned?

EXERCISE 3: DISAPPOINTMENT TO TRANSFORMATION

Sometimes we experience loss that, in time, through the “perfect 20-20” vision of hindsight, makes us realize that we have learned a valuable lesson or gained a blessing as a result.

Can you share an experience of a hardship you or a friend or family member have overcome that seemed vexing at the time, but as a result of which you now realize that you or they are better off?

EXERCISE 4: DEATH TO LIFE

Death to life is the cyclical journey that marks our Christian journey of discipleship. In his explanation of baptism in the Small Catechism, Martin Luther remarked that our baptism means that we are to “be drowned and die” so that “daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 1165).

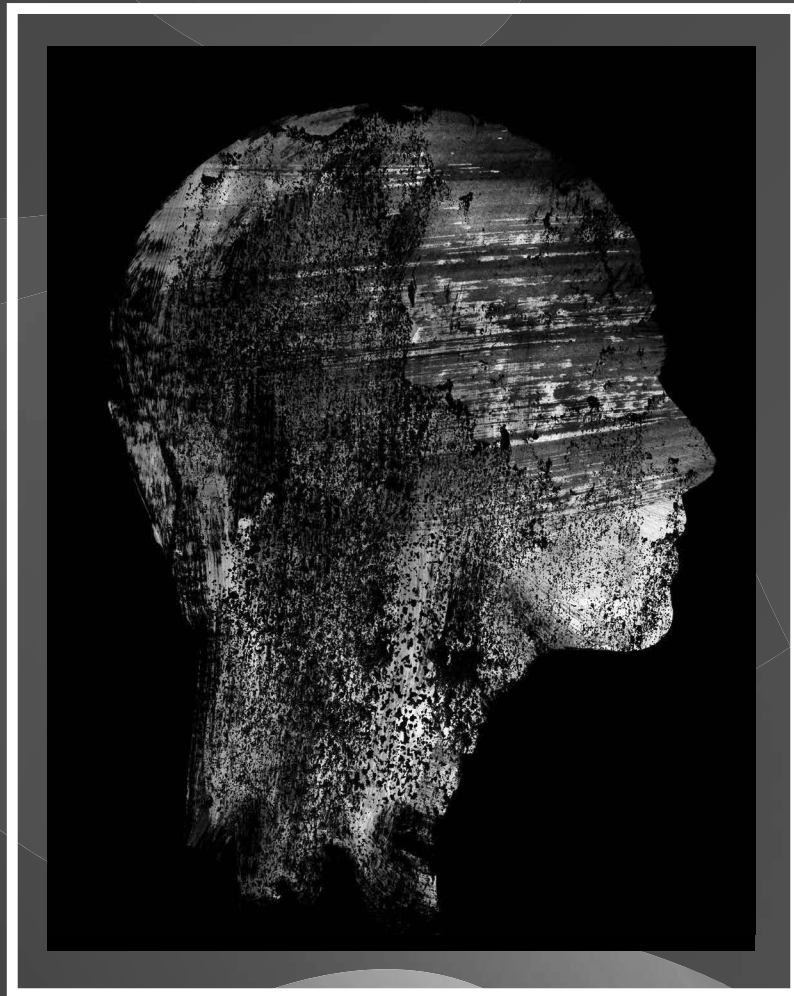
Discuss how Luther’s observation about baptism has applied to your experiences of recovery from loss and grief. How is God’s hand at work in this process? How has this death-life cycle been part of your faith journey?

EXERCISE 5: LOVE REMAINS

McCarthy observed that his journey underscored to him that love endures and remains, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

- In what ways does love endure all things?
- Describe the power and endurance of love in your life.
- Can you share an experience of how love prevailed after a time of grief and loss?



SOMETHING NEW EMERGES

By Terrence McCarthy

REFLECTIONS FROM A PASTOR LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

Recently, I've been reflecting on grief—not simply the sorrow experienced upon loss of a loved one but any type of loss. We grieve when we lose a job or experience financial difficulties. We grieve when we face challenges to our health and, daily, when we face chronic pain, illness or disability. We grieve when we must change short-term plans unexpectedly or when our long-term expectations aren't realized.

In the moment, I haven't always been aware of these small daily doses of grief. But I believe it's helpful for us to understand that we grieve daily and to name those small or ongoing losses. Otherwise, they can build up over time and impact our physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being.

The grief in these losses is unpredictable and can come in waves. You can be fine, even joyful, one moment—then the wave hits, and, suddenly, you're a pile of dust on the floor.

Four years ago, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Four months after that, I experienced a stroke. The MS diagnosis came after many appointments and tests for neurological changes I felt were happening. The stroke occurred suddenly, as I was watching my then-9-year-old son's baseball game.

THE GRIEF IN THESE LOSSES IS UNPREDICTABLE AND CAN COME IN WAVES.

After five months of inpatient rehabilitation at four separate facilities, I finally arrived home and began trying to adjust to life after the permanent motor paralysis of my left arm and leg.

My grief—and my absolute resolve not to be immobilized but to return to my ministry and relationships as fully and independently as I could—caused anxiety in my home. My perseverance (which my spouse called stubbornness), my urgency to move forward as quickly as I could and my lack of awareness of my own impairments were other aggravating factors.

If I were asked how one survives after a life-changing loss, I hope I would have the wisdom and courage to say with compassion that you don't survive—part of you dies. The part that was with this person, or this dream or this financial stability, can die. But when something dies, there are always remains. And out of these remains, something new can emerge.

The apostle Paul tells us that faith, hope and love remain (1 Corinthians 13:13). Earlier in the chapter, he tells us that love endures all things. I have found this to be true.

One activity that I've treasured over the years has been collecting dead tree branches and carving them into walking sticks with my son, Luke. When I first had my stroke and discovered that my left arm was severely affected, I was afraid I would never be able to carve sticks again.

Thanks to a wonderful recreational therapist who planted the seed with me in the first weeks after my stroke, I found myself picking up a stick and a knife about two years later and trying to figure out some way I could carve the stick. I do it differently now than I did before. A lot of the time, I hold the stick between my knees, position it against my shoulder or anchor it with the weight of my left upper arm and elbow on one end.

I call this “carving resurrection wood” because the sticks I start with have broken off a tree or been cut down and left to rot. With patience and persistence, I'm able to turn them into items that I hope not only look sharp but can be life-giving to others.

The gift that emerges from the ashes of what we lost doesn't replace what was lost, but it can point us in new directions. My greatest fear after having my stroke and realizing my limitations—to my mobility, my endurance, my concentration and my attention—was that I had lost my profession.

It was a profession I had aspired to my entire life. I had finally entered seminary, graduated and been ordained—then, five years later, bam! My ministry was dead. Or so I thought.

After inpatient rehab, I received home-based, then outpatient, therapy for six more months. Gradually, my mobility and endurance improved. I began to think about returning to professional ministry in some capacity.

I learned that the Gettysburg, Pa., campus of United Lutheran Seminary was looking for a chaplain and pastoral presence. The part-time position was a perfect fit. I am blessed that this ministry emerged from the remains of what I had lost.

I find statements that one “gets over” or “moves on” from grief to be harmful platitudes. Grief isn't something you recover from. It may change over time, and people might integrate it into their sense of self.

Now I simply identify myself as living amid grief. I am living after a life-altering stroke and a diagnosis of progressive MS. I'm living with the blessing of being a pastoral presence for students. I am living with my loved ones and treasured friends. I am living. That's who I am. †

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