Where Deep Joy Meets the Deep Suffering of the World

Mary Jo Leddy

Christians today are called to live with and bear with the questions until the Gospel is born anew in our times. Three experiences that these questions open up are explored here: a culture of dissatisfaction, a sense of disorientation, and an experience of fragmentation and clutter. A new apologetics will have to rely primarily on the text of lives, on the witness of those whose lives give weight to their words, to respond to these with gratitude, desire for meaning, and yearning for wholeness.

There is a spiritual maxim (originally attributed to Frederick Buechner) that has been repeated in many and various ways on vocation posters, in parish bulletins, and through Christian blogs: “The Place Where God Calls You is the Place Where Your Deep Joy Meets the Deep Hunger of the World.” This maxim has taken wing, I think, because it reflects a deep and ancient wisdom about the relationship between personal call and the reality of the times in which one lives. It also reiterates a basic principle of discernment: that the authenticity of the Gospel can always be recognized in the mysterious mix of joy and suffering. One should not create an island of joy in a sea of suffering, says the Gospel, and it is not Good News when one is only swamped by the sea of suffering in the world.

If one attempts to articulate an apologetics in these times and in this place called North America, it should first involve the intense and intuitive effort to “name”

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I am attempting to describe the correlation between the imagination of a culture and the imaginative construal of reality that is found in the Scriptures. It is the process of correlation that can take place within an individual or, more appropriately, within a community. Obviously here I am developing Paul Tillich's method of correlation as an imaginative process of "naming" (see Hall, 349–367 and Tracy, 45–46).

I do not think that philosophers and theologians begin by articulating the questions of a culture, which are then opened to the answers of scripture. I suspect it goes something more like this: a person or community internalizes the symbols and narratives of Scripture to the point where they begin to transform the deepest levels of imagination. This is much easier said than done in a culture, which is saturated with images. It involves a constant, daily, reference to the Scriptures—a pondering, a praying, a saying, and a singing until they transform the subconscious level of a person or community. In short, a biblical imagination.

If this person or community then internalizes the symbols and images of a culture, beyond and below the level of consciousness—then those two sets of images meet, collide, conflict or cohere or correlate. The sifting and sorting takes place, I believe, largely on an subconscious level, and it is difficult to distinguish the source of imaginative breakthrough. Yet, there does arise in consciousness the moment when an image or name seems to “fit” the reality of one’s own time and place. From that prereflective meeting of images (from the Scripture and from the culture) there may issue forth a naming, an intuition, an insight—call it what you will—a name that rings out anew words like temptation, idolatry, conversion, and

the particular form of joy and suffering in this context. The opening notes of the Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* resound today and still summon: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, particularly those who are poor or in anyway afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

Of this age . . . It is not always that easy to “locate” one’s life, to live with a full awareness of the time and the place of one’s existence. All too often we spend our energies thinking fondly of the good old days (which were never really that good) or waiting for the next bend in the road when things will get better. We seem to be able to imagine elsewhere more easily than here. Because we do not assume the reality of the burdens of this time and place of our lives, we miss the deepest blessings of our call to become disciples. This involves a process of naming, a much more imaginative process than the subsequent effort of knowing or analyzing a context.
redemption. It then falls to the theologian to see whether and how such a name can become the source of further reflection. The symbol gives rise to thought, as Paul Ricoeur says. It then belongs to the community of faith to discern if this is a true naming. I sometimes think that the most important reason people like myself must write our thoughts down is that we must give them over to the community to see if they are worthy and appropriate.

**Part One: Living the Questions**

The real questions of a culture are never abstract. They are weighty and press down through to the minds of our hearts where the imagination works and winnows.

The poet Rilke advised the younger poet, “Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, even without noticing it, live your way into the answer” (Letter Four). Christians today are called to live with, bear with the questions until the Gospel is born anew in our times.

As we bear with these questions, with the suffering of our times, we can do so with joy because we believe that we would not even be asking them if God had not already placed answers deep within us. This conviction grounded St. Augustine as he bore with the profound questions that accompanied the decline of the Roman Empire. He bore with the disorientation of his times until he discovered the reorienting image in the City of God.

As I have lived in this time and place, three questions have broken open the mind of my heart: the awareness of how we are consumed with dissatisfaction and the liberation that radical gratitude brings to this particular form of captivity; a sense of disorientation as political forms of purpose become more fragile and the renewed desire for religious meaning; the postmodern experience of fragmentation and clutter and the yearning for a whole or holy life.

**Consumed by Dissatisfaction/Liberated by Gratitude**

Elsewhere I have described, at greater length, the soul-destroying nature of the culture of money that we live in. Radical Gratitude continues to sell and be read almost eight years after its first printing. I do not mention this to toot my own horn or encourage book sales but simply to note that it seems to have given voice to the particular form of captivity that we experience in America, the North, and the West.

The culture of money has such power over our lives because it is so subtle and all-pervasive. The chains that hold us captive are not visible but they are real. It would be easy to sound off about economics but our particular form of captivity is not just about money—that would be to remove it somewhat from ourselves and leave it to the responsibility of bankers and economists. The culture of money
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in radical gratitude.

We are held captive when our deep spiritual desires are transformed into cravings for more. These cravings are induced within us through the business of advertising. It is advertising that simultaneously communicates the message that we have to want more and this means being dissatisfied with what we have. This dissatisfaction may take on many and various and more subtle forms. It may be a craving for more experiences, even more religious experiences, or a craving for more and better relationships.

The craving for more is inversely experienced as the sense that what we have is never enough. When the billionaire Howard Hughes was once asked how much money it would take to make him happy, he reportedly replied, “Just a little bit more.” In the culture of money, we begin to believe that if we just had a little bit more of whatever we would be happy but that what we have now is not enough. The objects of our craving may change, but the dissatisfaction will remain. This dissatisfaction will never be alleviated, because if it were, we would not go shopping. Many more people are working harder and longer in order to get “just a little bit more.” Some are literally working themselves to death.

We get the message that what we have is never enough. However, it doesn’t stop there. This message stays with us even when the shopping seems done for a while. Slowly but surely this message transmutes and transforms us at other levels of our being: I don’t have enough becomes I am not enough becomes I am not good enough.

In other words, the economically induced dissatisfaction in the culture of money not only drives us to shop, it also produces a profound dissatisfaction with one’s very self, one’s very soul, the core of one’s being. It generates within us profound feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy or guilt. Let me suggest that the intrinsic link between the dynamics of the economy, the psyche, and the spirit may go some way to explaining the curious situation in which so many North Americans, who live in the richest and most powerful nations on earth, feel generally powerless and vaguely guilty.

This dissatisfaction can widen and become dissatisfaction with others, with the world, with the church, and even with God. This is not to say that the world is as it should be, that every institution or relationship is perfect. We should never adjust to injustice or adapt to corruption and violence. Yet, we need to discern whether we are often dissatisfied or always dissatisfied. If we are always dissatisfied then we may have become yet another dissatisfied victim of the culture of money.
This is the gnawing sense of dissatisfaction that is so soul-destroying. It is our particular form of captivity. When we become more aware of how consumed we are in the process of consuming then a genuine religious desire for liberation begins to be felt. Who or what will set us free?

We will be liberated, I believe, by living in radical gratitude. This is a foundational religious attitude that is far deeper than being grateful for this or that thing. All too often we have a ledger view of life, adding up the pluses and minuses in the account book of our lives. In the process, we miss the amazing fact that we even have a life to add up. We take being alive for granted and move on to a cost-benefit analysis. Lost in the process is the incalculable mystery of simply being alive. The liberation of gratitude begins when we stop taking life for granted. It involves saying who I am is enough. Who I am is good enough. This is a fundamentally religious attitude that the wise ones sometimes called poverty of spirit. It is the spiritual insight that our lives are given, not manufactured or made up by us. Our given lives are not perfect but they are good enough. Such as we are is good enough to go on. There is an immense liberation from a sense of powerlessness and vague guilt that follows upon such a realization.

Such gratitude is not only spiritual but because it is also spiritual in the widest and deepest sense, it carries with it the promise of spiritual, psychological, political, and economic liberation.

**The Questioning of Political Purpose/
A New Search for Meaning**

We live in a culture that has also been defined by the Enlightenment myth of progress. The United States, because of its emergence as a political reality at the time when the values of the Enlightenment were beginning to take hold, has been defined by this myth more than any other country. Canada has also been defined by this myth, even as it took shape partly in reaction to it.

For most people, this myth is not some abstract notion but is rather deeply internalized as the conviction that “if you just work hard enough and think smart enough, things will get better and better.”

Even Christians who supposedly live by other visions have internalized this myth so deeply that it is often difficult to separate optimism from hope. The belief in the myth of progress has given us a way of understanding our lives, a narrative to live by. What is the point of your life—to better yourself and to make a better world?

The value of a better life seems so obvious that the really important question became not why but how. The evidence of this is readily visible in any bookstore with shelves upon shelves of how-to books.

The myth of progress was inherently energetic and expansive, and it involved a drive toward personal and social progress that was inherently imperialistic. It was the myth that impelled people to push into the unknown, the frontiers of knowledge, of the self, of geographical space.
This was a view of life and the world that was inherently oriented to the future. The religious traditions of the past became rather quaint, and the present was consumed on the way to something better. Parents expected that their children would be better off than they were. People involved in social change felt there was reason to believe that things would get better if they just worked hard enough and thought smart enough. Consultants became the new high priests who specialized in the “know how” of doing things better and better.

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is widespread doubt in this myth. Parents are not so sure their children will have an easier time. The realities of the dangerous proliferation of arms, the unintended consequences of some technologies, the toxic waste that has entered the food chain—these have given us pause and spurred many younger people to search for alternative ways of living. Many groups have been forced to conclude that things aren’t going to get better. Along the way, the myth of progress has been transformed into a thoroughgoing form of materialism. If we are losing the belief that things will get better and better then perhaps we can still believe that there could be more and more for more and more people. Consumer confidence becomes the new indicator of hope. Optimism is now tied to the rise and fall of the market. And what a fall there has been.

This sets the stage for a serious crisis of meaning: what is the point of it all?

This is not only a crisis in a worldview; it is also experienced as a crisis of political purpose. It is experienced as the stunned awareness that the American Empire may be past its prime.

It is not easy to entertain the thought that we have been living in an “empire.” After all America was founded as an alternative to the old empires of Europe. The word *empire* conjures up images of exploitation, which seem to contradict our stated political values of freedom, justice, and tolerance.

The transition from a small republic to a world empire took place at the end of the Second World War. An empire was born to save the nation and the globe itself from communism. For those of us who live in the heart of empire or in one of its colonies, it is uncomfortable to think of ourselves as living in a time of historical decline. We see ourselves as living in a “developed world” and tend to refer to other countries in the south as being part of a “underdeveloped world.” What a sea change it would be for us to think of ourselves as part of an overdeveloped or even a declining empire.
This decline is most obvious, at the moment, in the economic realities revealed in the recent collapse of the market—in the increasing debtor status of the United States and the emergence of China as America's banker. We are rapidly moving toward a multipolar world where there are not one but many centers of economic activity. America remains the great military superpower but the cost of this military global reach has overstretched the nation’s economic base. We who have been accustomed to the benefits of surging growth are now slightly bewildered by its apparent vulnerability.

The film *The Decline of the American Empire* by Quebec director Denys Arcand focuses on the difference between living in a society in a state of development and merely existing in a culture in a state of decline. The difference, the film suggests, has to do with the relative strength or weakness of the common social vision within which an individual lives.

Every social movement or political experiment begins with a vision that animates it and draws it forward. The vision may be stated in the most poetic images or it may be articulated in a politically refined constitution. In either case, the vision compels the response of those who share in it. A common social vision or ideal is something people aspire to, are exhilarated by and are willing to make sacrifices for. It transforms present action and interprets it in terms of future possibilities.

There are various ways of trying to cope with this loss of a common vision. More conservative groups seek to impose some sense of order and meaning as the social vision fades. More liberal groups turn toward developing and protecting the only world that they can—the world of the self and its rights. Although a great deal of time and energy is spent in the fight between liberals and conservatives—in politics, on social issues, and within the churches—the two sides are actually reflective of a common social loss; they are symptoms much more than they are solutions.

This is a dangerous situation that generates other troublesome ways of coping: the retreat to personal concerns, popular forms of hedonism, and most significantly, the search for enemies. When a group is defined less by what it is for then by who or what it is against, the “enemy” provides an important form of social glue for fragile societies.

This immense and confusing sense of a loss of political purpose provides an invitation, whether voiced or silent, for Christians to articulate another sense of meaning and purpose. Our key concern should be to ask, “What does it mean to live for the reign of God in a time when political meaning has been weakened?”
Like the people in captivity in Babylon, we suffer from a collapse of meaning not only in our political structures but also within our religious systems of meaning. Nevertheless, we are still capable of living for God. “We have in our day no priest, no prophet, no leader or king. We do not even have the words with which to offer sacrifice . . . and yet we follow you unreservedly and serve you with our whole hearts” (Dan 3:38).

**The Experience of Fragmentation/ the Desire for Wholeness**

The loss of a sense of common purpose and meaning is also part of the affliction of postmodernity. We no longer have large and long narratives within which to situate our particular stories. We live our lives in episodes of meaning. We grasp at bits and pieces of meaning that evaporate like the next episode in a sitcom. We flip from channel to channel but rarely have a sense of how all of the clips relate to each other.

In addition to this deep sense of fragmentation, we as consumers are also and inevitably surrounded by clutter—stuff. Indeed, the awareness of this clutter has spawned a whole new industry specializing in simplifying and uncluttering the stuff of life. The clutter consultants have capitalized on a real desire to sweep out the inner clutter.

The inner spiritual desires, which accompany this sense of fragmentation and clutter, coalesce in a new search for wholeness, which is perhaps the kind of holiness we seek . . . in “this age.” This desire for wholeness has been described eloquently by Wendell Berry in one of his “sabbath poems”:

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I walk on
distracted by a letter accusing me
of distraction, which distracts me
only from the hundred things
that would otherwise distract me
from this whiteness, lightness,
sweetness in the air. The mind
is broken by the thousand
calling voices it is always too late
to answer, and that is why it yearns
for some hard task, lifelong, longer
than life, to concentrate it
and make it whole. (Berry, 87)
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Yet, one has only to read more of Wendell Berry to understand that he is not writing about a vague vision, one that drifts off into abstraction does not provide
for the “concentration” of life. Essentially, what Berry is looking for is a way to “consecrate” his life, to commit and dedicate his life to that which is real, located and concrete.

So Christians today have an opportunity to speak about meaning that is not identified with a particular political structure, but it must be meaning that is not abstract and vague.

A crucial bridge to this meaning is what the philosopher Albert Borgman calls “focal practices,” practices that bring one’s life into focus, even when larger meanings still elude us. For example, the discipline of learning how to play a musical instrument brings an attunement of the self to the larger melodies; the regular practice of eating together can gather a family and community together even when the larger purpose of gathering is tenuous. The practice of the common meal draws the participants into a sense of community and sharpens the focus and purpose of those gathered.

**Part Two: The Answering Lives**

When Paul Tillich first articulated the “method of correlation,” he was living in difficult times. At the risk of oversimplifying, he said that the task of theology was to attend to the questions posed by a culture or context and then to correlate these to the message of the Scriptures. This is much easier said than done, as David Tracy has argued in his *Blessed Rage for Order*. Nevertheless, for all their differences, both Tillich and Tracy still have some enduring confidence in the power of texts, the message itself.

As I listen to many young people today, who are immersed in the sufferings and anxieties of their age, I hear that it is difficult for them to believe in any text as authoritative, any person as authoritative. “We listen to what the church leaders say,” they say, “but then we see how they live and we know they don’t believe what they say.”

Ultimately, the new apologetics will have to rely primarily on the text of lives, on the witness of those whose lives give weight to their words. There is no short cut, no easier way to make “sense” of the Gospel message.

In the midst of the dissatisfied cravings of this culture, the witness of people living with gratitude, with a joyful sense of having enough, of being enough, is a powerful statement.

In the midst of weakening structures of political meaning and purpose, the testimony of those who nevertheless have a sense of meaning and purpose is powerful, persuasive.

In the midst of the clutter and fragmentation of the times, the witness of lives that are concentrated and whole is simply eloquent.
This is to live joyfully in the midst of the particular suffering of our time and place and it is always the surest sign of the Gospel—it is persuasive, it makes sense.

I believe You
have given me
a word to speak
with my life.
This whole word
concentrates my life
gathers it up
and gives me over.
A burden no one
else can bear.
A blessing no one
else can bestow.
O light burden
O heavy blessing.

References


