PROJECT MUSE®

Preface

Michael C. Jordan

Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture, Volume 7, Number 3,
Summer 2004, pp. 5-15 (Article)

Published by Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/log.2004.0028>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/170326>

Preface

IN THE ETYMOLOGICAL CONNECTION between the words “heal” and “whole,” we encounter an example of the wisdom embedded in language. If healing is to make whole again, to make “free of wound or injury” in the Merriam Webster definition, then in our suffering, in our woundedness or vulnerability, we can seek the path leading to a wholeness in which we know ourselves to be healed. The Catholic tradition knows such a path well and illuminates such a path by exploring the meaning of suffering and by studying and contemplating the revealed image of human wholeness in the unique form of the incarnate God. The necessary link between healing and wholeness presents us with a constellation of themes appearing in countless forms in the Catholic intellectual and artistic traditions.

This connection between healing and wholeness crystallized for me while reading *These Black Stars*, a new collection of poems by Paul Murray, a Dominican priest born in Ireland and now teaching in Rome.¹ Murray indicates the source of the title in an epigraph to his book from Iris Murdoch: “There are times of suffering which remain in our lives like black absolutes, and are not blotted out. Fortunate are those for whom these black stars shed some sort of light.” This quotation is from Murdoch’s 1973 novel, *The Black Prince*, and an exploration of the context brings out the grim, unflinching encounter with suffering from which such words emerge. The novel’s narrator in the paragraph preceding the passage used by Murray declares, “The world is perhaps ultimately to be defined as a place of suffering,” and goes on to enumerate such suffering in a

manner calculated to make us feel its oppressive weight: "This is the planet where cancer reigns, where people regularly and automatically and almost without comment die like flies from floods and famine and disease, where people fight each other with hideous weapons to whose effects even nightmares cannot do justice, where men terrify and torture each other and spend whole lifetimes telling lies out of fear. This is where we live."² Black stars indeed.

Murdoch's narrator speaks of it being "fortunate" when dark suffering emits its strange illumination. Murray's poems, however, turn away from fortune, and a careful reading of the poems would call for a significant transformation of the thought expressed in the epigraph: blessed are those who find light in suffering. This transformation is not accomplished by turning away from the stunning face of suffering in our lives and in the world around us. The poems guide us through the perplexity and danger of suffering, noting moments of unexpected encounters with the seeds of grace in such suffering but also refusing to explain suffering away. This is seen in "Lines for Natasha," in which the speaker, in mourning the death of Natasha, rejects easy consolation:

I will not shape out of loss
or try to name the meaning of that hour
which had no exit.

I will make no pact with your death.

In other poems, such as "In the Making," suffering emanates from the lack of wholeness we experience in ourselves, "from that hurt void you feel / after actual loss," and the vocabulary of brokenness accumulates: "mere absence," "lack," "need." This opening poem in the volume prepares us for the Christian vision of suffering (and of the corresponding vision of human wholeness) in its first words: it is "the gift" that emerges from such suffering. The gentle music of the poem guides us through the encounter with suffering to the recognition

that the gift we receive comes to us from a giver, from a Creator, and is for us “like a new Eve emerging.” Surely, on one level, this poem marks the poet’s celebration of the gift of poetry and hints to us the collection itself gives witness to the quickening power of the spirit within us, the poems marking an awareness of the Holy Spirit at work within our lives beyond our full awareness.

Many of the poems in part one of the collection carry the reader down the path of suffering leading to a surprising encounter with what we might call incipient joy—a condition in which the first movement of what will become joy appears but only within a context in which the weight and darkness of suffering is still too close upon us to allow the full leap of joy to be experienced. So it is in “A Song for the Afflicted,” a poem acknowledging what might be the weight of depression or a condition of spiritual lassitude where “This hell / has the sadness of pain / that cannot cry.” The speaker is returning to us from the darkness and silence of this hell, however, having discovered that even in such affliction we have not been abandoned and gives witness by reporting to us that

Hidden within the deepest
self—no matter how
treacherous one has been

or how corruptible—hidden
within the deepest self
the seed of love remains.

A later poem in the collection, “A Journey Within,” resumes the courageous self-examination, with the speaker suggesting contemplation of the inner life has been neglected, so that upon leaving the world of mundane experience behind, “you are scarcely / able, at first, // to understand / where it is / you have come from / or why you are here / or where it is / you are going.” The short lines and brief stanzas reflect the halting, fragmented, and tentative nature of

the speaker's movement in the unfamiliar world of the inner life, perhaps after a long period of spiritual aridity. Incipient joy awaits once again, however, as the speaker reports with pleased surprise, "as the locked door / opens / into your emptied // memory, a small / trail of silvery dust / begins to stir."

Prayer, not fortune, opens the patient soul to the glimmer of illumination suffering sometimes yields. The speaker in the fifth poem of part two of the collection addresses the Lord for the first time within the collection in "The Delay." The pain of suffering is no longer fresh, the wound no longer threatening to drown out all else with pain, but the landscape is marked by suffering, we are in a condition of "Knowing so little / destroyed by what we know, guessing / so much and so much," and in this condition the speaker yearns for the voice of God. In this poem the condition of our lives is one of delay as named in the title: the arrival of the voice and presence of God for which we yearn is delayed and so we must open ourselves to the experience of delay. The speaker in the prayerful concluding lines of the poem knows we need to be healed:

Ah come, Lord, do not delay.
The weave and fabric of our lives
is worn: we need mending.
Our righteousness is threadbare.

In the subsequent poems, the quickening presence of the Holy Spirit seems more readily evident, the affirmations of divine love all the more deeply received and responded to. As already mentioned, the first words of the first poem in the collection are "the gift," and now, in part two, a poem titled "The Gift" reports the speaker's wonder while contemplating the reality of the gift of spiritual life within us: "even under / the malign / powers of rust / and rain, the heart / survives, the soul / retains its gift / of weathering." This gift, we are then reminded, does not obliterate suffering, is not some-

thing apart from suffering, but emerges from suffering: the last poem of part two, “In the End,” reminds us that all of us, “lovers / and madmen, mothers / and sad men—all / sing from a wound.”

Part three of *These Black Stars* includes a poem that presents the image of human wholeness apart from which we could not understand what it would mean to be healed. In “The Breath, the Clay,” the speaker again prayerfully addresses God and contemplates the wholeness of the human person in the light of the incarnation: we are a mystery to ourselves, but the speaker addressing God knows “we are / each one // made in your / likeness. Our flesh, / our clay, formed / in the unseen // image of the / eternal Word, in the / dreamed likeness / of the Son // who would take / flesh.”

I spoke of incipient joy as a dominant theme in the early sections of the collection, and in part four, we reach a fuller experience of joy—the leap of joy. The penultimate poem in the collection, “Rising,” its Easter motif clearly suggested by the title, moves beyond black stars to full illumination and hope for resurrection:

above the void,
three stars within us
rise, three

moving suns: passion,
wakefulness, joy.
And can such living

flame, such radiance
be born from dust
to return to dust?

This collection of lucid, measured, and chiseled poems provides an intense sequence of stepping stones enabling the reader to confront the terrifying power of suffering while also guiding the reader to a path that emerges on the far side of suffering. Murdoch’s

narrator in the words of the epigraph exhibits great courage by facing up to suffering and by being willing to grant the possibility of illumination emerging from the dark stars of such suffering. But the speaker in Murray's poems exceeds such courage by daring to affirm through faith and hope the presence in the world of beauty and love and the horizon of resurrection even with full knowledge of the depth of suffering.

In this issue of *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, we find the theme of healing and wholeness emerging in a number of articles and involving diverse areas of culture including law, psychology, cinema, theology, and philosophy.

A distinctive contribution made by Mohandas Gandhi to the concept of justice in the law is his emphasis on justice as "a healing of persons," in the argument offered by **Raymond B. Marcin** in "**Gandhi and Justice.**" While reminding us that Gandhi was a trained legal scholar and a London-educated barrister, Marcin contrasts the concept of justice as illuminated by Gandhi with the attenuated concept prominent in much modern thought in which claims to justice become seen as equivalent to "an emotional expression which turns one's demand into an absolute postulate" (drawing here on the words of Alf Ross quoted by Marcin). Gandhi drew largely on "the speeches of Jesus, the thought of Tolstoy, and the works of the nineteenth-century transcendentalists," as well as on Hinduism in developing his account of justice as a healing of persons. Gandhi developed an understanding of nonviolence grounded in a vision of "holiness and wholeness" that was congruent, in Marcin's account, with concepts developed by Schopenhauer and later elaborated by Erwin Schrödinger, especially through the emphasis on "the underlying interidentity and connectedness of all being." Gandhi carried such concepts into the realm of experience in his work for social justice:

Gandhi's discovery was that not only by accepting the physical consequences of the unjust act, but also (and this most

importantly) by bringing the fact of that injustice and the fact of shared human identity to the attention of the evildoer, one was bringing about a situation of true, thorough, and ultimate justice, instead of the forced physical representation of justice with which courts and lawmakers must content themselves. A healing and not a victory occurs.”

John Haldane, in “**Sentiments of Reason and Aspirations of the Soul**,” addresses through the arguments of philosophy the concepts of the existence and immortality of the human soul, reaching beyond theism to an encounter with a religious understanding of the soul: “It is common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to think the afterlife provides some sort of completion of what was begun earlier but was interrupted by death. How are we to understand this notion of completion, and how is it related to the meaning of human history and of human life in general?” Haldane first explores the idea of the soul and arguments for the reality of the soul, sets out four possibilities for arguments about the survival of the soul after death, and then brings forward arguments from Aquinas and other medieval thinkers for the immortality of the soul. The final section of the paper takes up the concept of “the aspirations of the soul,” a “natural desire for eternal life in the company of God,” and explores the consequences of such aspirations again in philosophical terms: “Our striving seeks completion in something that is itself complete, something that is the proper object of our actions and gives them ultimate value—not an ‘it’ but a ‘thou,’ and not being God but being united with God.”

Romanus Cessario, O.P., in “**Sex, Lies, and Freud**” argues that Freud’s concept of psychological healing was fundamentally flawed because he lacked a concept of the proper end or *telos*—of completion and wholeness—in relation to which his concept could take shape. Freud’s defective concept of the human person has had wide-ranging cultural influence. Cessario observes and illustrates that influence insightfully and humorously through a discussion of some

of the films of Woody Allen. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's work on Freud, Cessario argues, "Freud elaborated a putative archaeology of the human person but failed to identify the true end of humankind, or what *Veritatis splendor* calls the truth about the human good. If the analysis set forth by Ricoeur is correct, it is Freud's own psychological system that impedes him from offering a thematic account of what makes for the perfection of the human being." As the preceding reference to *Veritatis splendor* indicates, Cessario shows how John Paul II "urges Christian believers to respect the God-given finalities of human nature and action—the moral teleology that finds its first expression in the inclinations of natural law," and shows how such teachings restore a proper understanding of human sexuality.

The phenomenon and concept of self-deception poses fundamental philosophical problems, and the possibility of overcoming (that is, of healing) self-deception must be addressed if we are to achieve confidence in the possibilities of knowledge. In **"How to Cure Self-Deception: An Augustinian Remedy,"** Shawn Floyd develops an approach to self-deception from the writings of Augustine, arguing that Augustine saw self-deception as grounded in sin. Floyd then brings to bear Augustine's concept of charity to show how it can be used to provide a solution to the problem of self-deception. For Augustine, "self-deception is a kind of cognitive distortion resulting from sinful behavior," calling then for an exploration of Augustine's concept of sin and sin's effects on the mind. Although Augustine does not directly propose that charity provides a solution to the problem of self-deception, Floyd argues the concept of charity as developed broadly in Augustine's writings can legitimately be brought forward as an "Augustinian" solution or remedy to the problem of self-deception.

In the concluding section of the article, Floyd turns to an important modern account of self-deception in the work of Bas van Fraassen and confronts the possibility that philosophic rigor alone might not be sufficient to overcome the problem of self-deception.

While finding much to admire in von Fraasen's account, Floyd finds the resources brought to bear on the problem by Augustine to be much more promising: "Augustine does not bend to skepticism. He draws from the wellsprings of Christian theology and offers us a remedy that purports to cure self-deception with no residual uncertainty. I have argued that this remedy can be found in his appeal to charity."

Scandals in the Catholic Church in the United States bring us face to face with the importance of the healing power of humility, argues **Deborah Ruddy** in "**The Humble God: Healer, Mediator, and Sacrifice**," and St. Augustine's view of the primacy of humility in Christian life is particularly urgent for the Catholic Church in the United States at this time. "What is so singular about Augustine's teaching on humility is that he so clearly views Christ's humility as more than a moral example to be imitated; it is the central way that our reconciliation with God occurs," Ruddy argues. She goes on to discuss Christ as healer, with the humility of Christ counteracting both human self-importance and self-deprecation, showing that Augustine describes "Christ's redemptive work as more curative than juridical," and views humility through "medical images of 'cleansing,' 'purifying,' and 'healing.'" The article develops the concept of Christ as mediator and explores "Christ's self-emptying from the incarnation to the passion." In the end, Ruddy turns back to her opening reflections concerning recent scandals in the Church, suggesting the "renewal of humility in the Catholic Church today" can "deepen our conversion through this foundational Christian attribute." The article reminds us that "the Church itself is rooted in the very humility of God," from which Ruddy draws an important conclusion: "It is God's humility that calls us to be a church that is unafraid to face the humiliation of having failed to live up to the truth that we proclaim."

Anthropologists study the close connections between healing and religion in premodern and nonindustrialized cultures, but if we

turn to the film *Bringing Out the Dead* by Martin Scorsese, we find an expression of the need within modern cultures to bring medicine and religion into a cooperative relationship, according to **David M. Hammond** and **Beverly J. Smith** in “**Death, Medicine, and Religious Solidarity in Scorsese’s *Bringing Out the Dead*.**” “Martin Scorsese works explicitly and self-consciously out of a Catholic vision of the world and the human condition,” according to the article, and it is this Catholic vision that brings Scorsese to believe “the relationship between religion and medicine has become perverted and falsely dichotomized. The emphasis in medicine today is on the technology that is increasingly effective in postponing death, to the point that death has become redefined as failure rather than inevitability. . . . The religious ‘why?’ has been supplanted by a technological ‘why?’” Hammond and Smith analyze a number of themes in Scorsese’s film to show how the film as a work of art proposes the importance of establishing a closer connection between medicine and religion in the act of healing. In the terms developed in this preface, we can note the danger of separating the concept of healing in medicine from a concept of human wholeness grounded in a religious perspective on the human person.

Joseph Atkinson and **Mary Shivanandan** in “**Person As Substantive Relation and Reproductive Technologies: Biblical and Philosophical Foundations**” examine fundamental problems posed by new biomedical reproductive technologies and show, through the development of biblical and philosophical accounts of the human person, the incompatibility of many biotechnological developments with the dignity of the human person. Through an exegetical study of Genesis 1:3, the authors develop key biblical concepts pertaining to the nature of the human person so that judgments concerning whether biomedical technologies respect the dignity of the person can be drawn. The biblical concept emphasizes the body–soul unity of the person, views the person not as an autonomous individual but as necessarily linked to others, and

regards the ontological reality of marriage to be such that “the properly constituted relationship between man and woman results in a third reality, which is called ‘one flesh.’” These biblical concepts are then examined from a philosophical perspective, demonstrating that they can also be known through reason. These fundamental principles regarding the human person “give us an understanding of the processes active within creation, of the critical relationship of the person to the body, and of the person to the physical generations, and should thereby help us to develop an adequate framework to evaluate biotechnological procedures.”

Michael C. Jordan
Editor

Editor’s Note: In Jan Michael Joncas’s article, “Image of the Invisible God,” published in Volume 7:2, the incorrect version of Caravaggio’s painting *Supper at Emmaus* was presented. The correct *Supper at Emmaus* by Caravaggio can be viewed at www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-bin/WebObjects.dll/CollectionPublisher.woa/wa/work?workNumber=NG172. We apologize for the error.

Notes

1. Paul Murray, *These Black Stars* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2003).
2. Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 300.