

EMBRACING LIFE, EMBRACING THE CROSS

Edward Schillebeeckx and Suffering

Kathleen McManus

‘WHY DO YOU EMBRACE YOUR CROSS, YOU FOOL?’ In his construal of Christ’s passion, Mel Gibson presents a bloody, lacerated Jesus as taunted with this question. Gibson’s intent was to dramatize the suffering that saves us. A fuller reading of the Gospel, however—and of reality—reveals that it is love that saves us, a love that embraces the whole of human life and therefore its sufferings, but a love that is fundamentally positive. As Jesus puts it in John’s Gospel, ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10).

Some time after I saw Gibson’s film, I was walking on a wild, empty beach, and I experienced one of the Spirit’s jarring juxtapositions. The film’s disturbing interpretation of Christ’s sufferings broke across another, more vibrant picture which the iridescence of the sea had recalled to my mind: that of a young woman reclining on a boat and looking out on a similarly sun-drenched sea. The camera was at her back, and a panorama of sea and sky lay at her feet—the world as it were awaiting her embrace. It was, above all, her delight in the prospect that the photo was conveying.

The woman was nineteen year-old Kelly Jamison,¹ and the picture had first captivated me when it was hung on the wall of her hospital room. She had been hospitalised for months after being struck down by a hurtling boulder during a college mountain-climbing expedition. Other students had escaped, but the boulder struck Kelly in the back,

¹Names have been changed for the purposes of this article.

crushing her pelvis and smashing her head into the snow-covered ground.

When Kelly was airlifted off the mountain, she was more than unconscious. Her heart had stopped beating; she also had extensive internal injuries. When she arrived at the hospital, doctors opened her chest and massaged her heart until it beat again, enabling the flow of blood back to her brain.

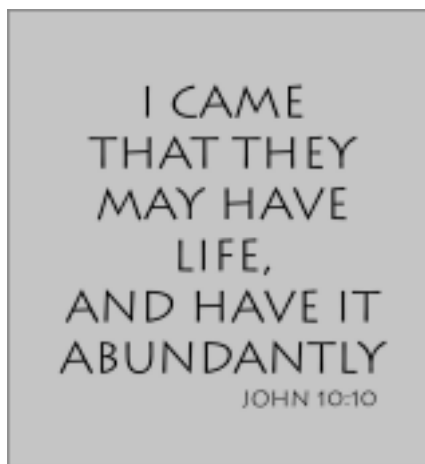
There was, naturally, a sense of relief amid the shock for Kelly's family and friends; it was as if she had been brought back from the dead. But there were more difficult feelings too. Gratitude for her life was mingled with fear of what her injuries might imply. She was in a coma, and machines were sustaining all of her vital functions. Doctors began what would become an incessant round of surgery. Infection was a constant worry, and on one occasion threatened to kill her. Around her a network of prayer, solidarity and support began to form, a network which began from Kelly's family and closest college friends, but which seemed to have no bounds.

Now and then someone would voice concern about the Jamison family's tenacity. 'What are they fighting for? If she emerges from this, what kind of a life will she have? What if she has sustained serious brain damage? How will she feel if she wakes up with countless injuries and learns that she will not have the free and active lifestyle she cherished? What about psychological trauma?' And there was also the most radical question of all: 'Why did the doctors open her chest and restart her heart in the first place?'

These were not questions that the Jamison family were asking. The one whom they loved had embraced life in its fullness, and without reservation. Now, as she lay powerless before them, they embraced her life for her. Now, embracing life meant embracing the cross, together. Kelly's family and closest companions did not analyze their tragedy. Instead, they threw themselves into the battle for Kelly's life, warding off naysayers and sceptics, and choosing courageously to hope beyond hope.

Henry Jamison, Kelly's father, kept abreast of every clinical detail, monitoring his daughter's machines like a watchdog. Even before her eyes opened, he was urging her on like a coach goading his team to victory. Peggy Jamison, her mother, was a constant healing presence, playing music in her daughter's intensive care room and reading aloud the countless cards and letters that flowed in, whether from the

university Kelly attended, or from friends far and wide, or from the growing network of strangers who had heard of Kelly's story and were sending assurances of prayer. Kelly's sister gave her manicures, while at weekends her aunts and family friends would arrive, speaking words of love, recalling joyful memories, keeping her in life.



Kelly's young college friends, frightened and sad, spoke often of her unique personality. They told stories of her unquenchable spirit, of the mischievous ways in which she would draw them along with her into active pursuits—indeed, into life. Would she live that free, engaged life again, they wondered? Could she bear the diminishment they feared? But those were questions about the future. The Jamisons were fighting in the present for Kelly's survival. And they knew, even before she could understand or speak the words herself, that Kelly also was waging a mighty battle from within. They accompanied her, one day at a time. That accompaniment meant not only an utter restructuring of life in the practical order, but also a deep restructuring of priorities—a new valuation of life's final meaning. In the process, the Jamisons at once engaged the best and most rigorous of medical science, and surrendered themselves to the power of prayer emanating from the invisibly expanding community all around them.

The struggle of Kelly and her family point us to what the theologian Edward Schillebeeckx OP calls 'the authority of suffering humanity'. For Schillebeeckx, there is a creative and transforming knowledge that comes only from suffering; to use his phrase, suffering has a 'critical and productive epistemic power'. Society at large ignores this power, even denies it; when faced with suffering, it lets itself depend on technology, especially in situations like Kelly's when there is a question as to whether life is sustainable. But Schillebeeckx maintains that 'the authority of suffering humanity' must be allowed to challenge the authority of conventional reason. Then, even when suffering seems meaningless, it can nevertheless enrich our lives.

Negative Contrast Experience

For Schillebeeckx, the experience of suffering is of special theological significance, notwithstanding God's commitment to the flourishing of what Schillebeeckx calls the *humanum*, in all its diversity and complexity.² Suffering enables us to imagine what we are hoping for. The fullness of life for which we long—salvation—comes to awareness in counterpoint with the concrete reality of suffering. In this context, Schillebeeckx coins the expression 'negative contrast experience': an experience of injustice, oppression or suffering that gives rise to protest and spurs us towards active transformation. Schillebeeckx speaks of how contrast experiences convey an intuitive sense of obligation. We just *know* that we must work for something different. For Schillebeeckx, this kind of intuitive response is also a charismatic moment: it is here above all that we are in contact with the Spirit.³

Whereas some in our world see only meaninglessness and chance, the Christian response is 'No!', says Schillebeeckx—or at least 'Nevertheless!' The basis of this response is faith in God, a conviction that God is present even in suffering, even in failure, even in death. People experience powerlessness and extreme vulnerability when scientific and rational measures fail to conquer suffering of the body, mind and spirit. Yet meaning can be found within these, through an inner impulse which Schillebeeckx describes as the 'charismatic element', moving us towards a kind of change (conversion, *metanoia*). Schillebeeckx, drawing on Thomas Aquinas, speaks of an experiential aspect of faith, corresponding to a tendency of the human spirit that derives from the living God.⁴ In situations of powerlessness or acute suffering, human beings are thrown back upon a God whom they find within themselves, in a core of mysticism.

**Meaning can
be found in
vulnerability**

² Schillebeeckx uses the Latin neuter adjective *humanum* as a technical term to signal that what it is to be human cannot be defined in that way that a substantive noun would suggest. It conveys the sense of a project, involving body and soul, individuality and community; the *humanum* is a process of constant transformation under the dynamic call of God.

³ See 'Church, Magisterium, and Politics', in *God the Future of Man*, translated by Theodore Westow (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 143-166, especially 155-156.

⁴ 'The Non-Conceptual Intellectual Element in the Act of Faith: A Reaction', in *Revelation and Theology*, translated by N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), volume 2, 30-75, here 45.

This mystical impulse within the self connects us with the eschatological reality of the divine promise. The experience is inevitably one of contrast: the ultimate divine grounding of our lives with its promise may be not at all clear to us, but we know it through an experience of contrast. Our model for such mysticism is Jesus, whose relationship of trusting communion with the one he called Abba remained unbroken, even as he suffered and died on the cross. What defines the relationship is God's faithfulness to Jesus, even through Jesus' own dark night of pain and felt abandonment. Jesus' unbroken trust is thus vindicated, even if the vindication becomes known only in the resurrection. As Schillebeeckx repeatedly expresses it, 'on the cross, God remains holding Jesus' hand'.

In contemporary society, we can learn from this image. Scientific reason, with its prevailing view of what counts as 'quality of life', tends to see suffering as a technical problem to be solved. It writes off as meaningless any suffering which human ingenuity cannot relieve. But as people created in the image of God, we may properly explore what it means to embody the image of a God who never abandons the sufferer. When we are at the limits of reason, this Divine Image beckons us into a praxis of solidarity and a discipleship of presence.⁵

This discipleship of presence may seem merely passive; in fact, however, it represents a deeply prophetic activity. The refusal to abandon the sufferer is, in fact, a counter-cultural position of active resistance and protest against the restrictions on what is conventionally deemed 'meaningful human life'. As technologies develop, as society is gradually coming to accept physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, as the human genome project enables us to manipulate life in unprecedented ways, we need to fight a social and political war even for the right to remain holding the sufferer's hand. For society at large, and many in the medical profession in particular, see suffering as inherently meaningless.

⁵ 'Praxis of solidarity' and 'discipleship of presence' are phrases borrowed from Kenneth Surin and Scott Gustafson respectively. See 'Theodicy?' in Kenneth Surin, *Turnings of Darkness and Light: Essays in Philosophical and Systematic Theology* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989), 73-90; and Scott W. Gustafson, 'From Theodicy to Discipleship: Dostoyevsky's Contribution to the Pastoral Task in *The Brothers Karamazov*', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 45 (1992), 209-222. See my discussion of these in relation to Schillebeeckx in Kathleen A. McManus, *Unbroken Communion: The Place and Meaning of Suffering in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 162-170.

SO YOU HAVE
PAIN NOW;
BUT I WILL SEE YOU AGAIN,
AND YOUR HEARTS
WILL REJOICE,
AND NO ONE
WILL TAKE YOUR JOY
FROM YOU

JOHN 16:22

Our point, Schillebeeckx' point, is that there is meaning in the experience of suffering, both for the sufferer and for the human community at large, even when the primary sufferer is unable to register meaning. The experience of Kelly Jamison's family in the weeks before she came to

consciousness profoundly illustrates this point. And no one in touch with Kelly's story, however far removed in the extensive relational network emanating from it, can doubt its truth. Kelly's family was fortunate that the doctor in charge of her case never flagged in his battle for her recovery. By contrast, another doctor with whom they dealt saw all efforts as futile, and failed to comprehend their hopeful determination. Wisely, they chose to ignore him. But, unfortunately, his attitude is becoming more typical in such cases.

Schillebeeckx' theology helps us to name and understand this trend, and also to resist it. As scientific knowledge extends, we seem to be losing touch with what we might call contemplative knowing. We are so convinced that we both can and must control the contours of life, using all the means at our disposal to increase efficiency and optimise performance, that 'quality of life' comes to be equated with autonomy. And the prizing of autonomy has infected our means of valuing and knowing. Increasingly, we are a society incapable of the 'knowing' that functions beneath the surface of empirical reality. In such a situation, theology has before it the urgent task of articulating for the world, particularly the scientific world, the meaning in suffering. We have the task of teaching people why it is a diminishment of our humanity, an erosion of any sense of being created in God's image, for us simply to seek to release the sufferer from this world. Schillebeeckx helps us name what we know in suffering and how we know it.

What We Learn From Suffering

What is involved in the refusal to abandon the sufferer? What do we mean by a 'praxis of solidarity' manifest in a 'discipleship of presence'?

For Schillebeeckx, the experience of suffering enables us to see much more sharply what is wrong with the world, and what, therefore, must be done to promote human flourishing. We cannot know what true and full humanity is, because its reality lies in the future. But we *can* know when it is *not* developing.

The knowledge gained through suffering is neither the practical, 'purposeful' knowledge of science and technology, nor the 'purposeless' knowledge of contemplation. In a world much damaged by the severance of science and contemplation, suffering enables the two to come together. 'Just like contemplative or aesthetic experiences, experiences of suffering *overcome* a person.' And yet suffering, as a contrastive experience,

... opens perspectives for a praxis that aims at removing both the suffering itself and its causes ... anticipating a better future and actively committed to realising it.⁶

Schillebeeckx is therefore far from simply rejecting scientific knowledge or rational authority. His concern is rather the proper relationship between scientific and contemplative knowing. Both should be informed by the contrastive experience of suffering; both should be subject to it. But what does this look like in reality? How do we discern the 'new praxis anticipating a better future and actively committed to realising it'? What does it mean for situations like that of Kelly Jamison, where we are at the point of 'silently holding the sufferer's hand'?

Christian prayer, Schillebeeckx asserts, can inspire us to act in quite distinctive, transformative ways. The meaninglessness of history embodied in human suffering can only be transformed piece by piece, through specific actions in particular circumstances. But as this happens, fragments of salvation emerge. Suffering is rendered meaningful, as indeed is whatever is negative in the whole of human history. Real healing and wholeness are integral to what 'salvation-coming-from-God-in-Jesus' means. In particular experiences of suffering where science fails to bring about the healing we desire, we

⁶ 'Questions on Christian Salvation of and for Man' (1978), in *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology and the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 101-126, here 125.

need to look again at what the Christian experience tells us about 'healing'.

'Healing' and the Miracles of Jesus

***In the Gospels
miracles are
always connected
with faith***

In his reflections upon Gospel images, Schillebeeckx points to how those in distress experienced Jesus' human presence as 'saving' (and here we might substitute 'healing'). Indeed, suffering and distress were the conditions for experiencing the gospel as 'glad tidings'. Wherever miracles of physical healing occur in the Gospels, something is said about faith: 'Go; your faith has made you well' (Mark 10:52). Faith, healing and conversion are inseparable. And what is decisive is the personal act of resorting to Jesus, whose *humanity* provides assurance of God's help. At the same time, however, Schillebeeckx is very clear that it is *God's* presence and saving power that people are experiencing in Jesus' humanity. What this means for healing and salvation is illumined in Schillebeeckx' treatment of 'the problem in Nazareth', where Jesus was unable to effect any cures. The problem in Jesus' home town was not that people did not believe that Jesus had the power to work miracles, but that they did not attribute this power to God. Further, and more importantly,

They were asking for miracles which would make no demand for *metanoia* or imply a call to fellowship with God.⁷

Physical healing in the gospels is an external sign of the deeper reality of salvation—a salvation that comes about only through conversion or *metanoia*, that inner, dynamic 'turning' at the heart of the experience of negative contrast. This 'turning' is at once profoundly personal and utterly other-centred, and requires existential trust in the divine underpinnings of reality. Perhaps we may see the 'problem in Nazareth' reflected in our own society, subject as it is to the 'authority of reason', and to a vision of humanity defined by physical perfection and the concrete realisation of our plans. The kind of healing that Jesus offers depends upon a change of heart within the

⁷ *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, translated by Hubert Hoskyns (New York: Seabury, 1979 [1974]), 196.

experience of human suffering. This change of heart permits truth to approach in the flesh; it fosters human solidarity and a living discipleship of presence, and in its turn it is fostered by them. This discipleship follows God in vulnerability, and thereby makes God's presence in the world stronger.

Healing, salvation, the wholeness and flourishing of humanity, do not therefore occur apart from the mystery of what is known in suffering; nor do they occur apart from the complex web of human relationships. And it is the living God who approaches us. The God who is faithful to our human cause finds a way of being present even amidst negativity and suffering:

Truth comes near to us by the alienation and disorientation of what we have already achieved and planned The hermeneutical principle for the disclosure of reality is not the self-evident, but the scandal, the stumbling block of the refractoriness of reality In such experiences of what proves completely refractory to all our inventions we shall also finally discover the basis for what we rightly call revelation.⁸

In ordinary life, such liberation emerges only in fragmentary ways, counterpointed with negative experiences of contrast. It is in the fissures and the gaps, in the seeming breaks in logic, that truth emerges. There, for the believer, God shows Godself. There, in those dynamic fissures, experience discloses mercy at the heart of resistant reality. Thus experiences of suffering can be threatening or revelatory, depending upon our ability to experience reality as a gift by which God opens up a future for humanity. But this capacity is a matter of faith, and our faith convictions require us to surrender to a gift. It is an urgent task for theology today to enable society, and especially the scientific community, to see humanity in terms of faith-cognition.

The Jamisons' Suffering

Kelly Jamison's tragic accident devastated her family and friends. It was an unwanted reality that broke into their lives abruptly, turning them inside out. Kelly had plans and designs for her life, entwined in a

⁸ *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, translated by John Bowden (New York: Seabury, 1980 [1977]), 35.

network of dreams and plans cherished by her family and friends. A hurtling boulder altered that reality for ever, effecting the ‘alienation and disorientation’ of all that she had, in Schillebeeckx’ phrase, ‘achieved and planned’. This ‘scandal’, this ‘stumbling block’ did not come from God; it was no part of God’s design. The God whom Schillebeeckx calls ‘pure positivity’ resisted this ‘scandal’ in and through the very impulse of resistance moving the hearts of all who loved Kelly. Their ‘no’ to this suffering reality was God’s ‘no’. That ‘no’ was the other side of a far more fundamental ‘yes’ to life.

The Jamisons lived their lives within a dynamic of contrast, lasting a long time. Moreover, the experience enabled them to unearth a fundamental reality of inchoate longing that only the suffering could have brought to awareness. That longing, that desire was the root of a new knowing, of an intuitive faith-cognition that led to a practical quest for a new future where freedom and happiness would be understood differently because of the experience of suffering. For Schillebeeckx, the ‘contrast experience of suffering’ makes us aware of ‘a future meaning, a future freedom and happiness that will be real’. It also opens us to the integrating and reconciling force of contemplation, undertaken purely for itself without any further end—a contemplation that anticipates the goal of all reality, and at the same time nourishes a ‘future-creating praxis which is to conquer evil and its sufferings’.⁹ Suffering and threat reveal this new future. Those very conditions become the mode of a new knowing, and as such they shape both the nature and the content of what is known. What is known inheres precisely in an enfleshed praxis of solidarity with the sufferer. It inheres in the faithful human presence that is God’s chosen means of being in this world.

If we ask what Kelly and her family learnt from their experience of suffering and threat, the answer can only come from them. But, as one who was a caring observer and can draw on Schillebeeckx’ theology, I might venture some suggestions. Perhaps the situation of threat that the Jamisons faced evoked in them an active embrace of life that resulted in a new valuation of life’s deepest meaning.

Was Kelly’s life ‘worth’ saving as she lay comatose with massive internal injuries? Some people in society at large and in the scientific

⁹‘Questions on Christian Salvation’, 126.

community would answer that question in terms of how likely it was that Kelly would come through the experience with an acceptable quality of life. And given the initial evidence, the answer to the question would have been (and in some cases, was) 'no'. All the evidence indicated that, if Kelly lived, her quality of life would be severely compromised at every level—physically, mentally and emotionally.

But the Jamisons' instinctive 'no' to the prospect of Kelly's demise was rooted in something deeper than the empirically pragmatic. Their response was an existential act of faith. At the same time, they were not simply ignoring scientific reason. Overwhelmed by suffering, they were allowing both their scientific and their contemplative knowing to be informed by suffering's authority. The experience of suffering itself—Kelly's and their own—guided their choice of the narrowest, most daring medical path. That same experience of suffering informed their contemplative knowing of the deep Mystery which grounded them. Suffering threw them back upon God, upon the promise and substance of life. Existentially they trusted the promise, not knowing whether or how it would be fulfilled. And their trust was rewarded with genuinely new life.

For Kelly Jamison awoke from her coma a month after her accident. Her initial responses were slow and non-verbal, but she gave clear evidence of recognising her visitors. Within a few weeks, she was sitting upright and talking. Initial confusion gradually gave way to clarity. Memory of life before the accident returned, although it would be some time before she would be ready to retrieve the details of that event. Major reconstructive surgeries continued. After Christmas, Kelly returned to her home town of Seattle, first to a local hospital, and then to her family's home. Before leaving the hospital in Portland for Seattle, Kelly told her parents clearly, with characteristic stubbornness, that she wanted to do all that it would take to get well. She has been engaged in a rigorous programme involving both physical and occupational therapy, and currently moves

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THAT THEY MAY KNOW YOU,
THE ONLY TRUE GOD,
AND JESUS CHRIST
WHOM YOU HAVE SENT

JOHN 17:3

around easily on crutches. Her college friends visited her for her birthday, and reported that they found Kelly high-spirited, energetic and full of new plans for the future. Those plans are real, concrete and courageous. Just prior to her birthday, Kelly had phoned the university with a request that her file be reopened so she could register for the Fall semester.

Kelly Jamison's amazing recovery and steady progress are surely a result of her family's passionate and tenacious refusal to abandon her to a fatalistic scenario. Their embrace of life both encompassed and sustained their embrace of the cross. And the resurrection that awaited them was the quite particular, concrete emergence in time of the Divine Promise that had, silently and mysteriously, always been their ground.

But the story could have had a different ending. It could have turned out that Kelly remained in a coma. Or she might have been struggling to recognise and communicate with her loved ones, struggling even to function minimally. Any number of painful scenarios might have been possible. Would the 'refusal to abandon the sufferer' have been the right course given these potential outcomes? I believe the answer is 'yes'. The Jamisons could not know the outcome. They acted on the basis of faithful love. Of course they wanted the best possible future for Kelly, but they did not measure the value of her life according to empirical standards. They valued her life absolutely and unconditionally; suffering only made that value plainer.

If Kelly had not recovered in the marvellous way she did, the Jamisons' trust would still have borne fruit. Their lives were radically transformed by Kelly's suffering. Their existential witness of faith drew forth an array of profound responses from the human community, near and far. Their restructuring of priorities, their utter dependence on prayer and on the bonds of relationship, became a palpable vehicle of grace for others, just as the growing network of communal support mediated grace to them. In vulnerability and in trust, and precisely because of the threat they faced, a deeper humanity was cultivated, and God's image in the world took on more flesh.

The Refusal to Abandon the Sufferer

The Jamison family's story profoundly illustrates the links between the refusal to abandon the sufferer, a willingness to move away from

prevailing models of rationality, and a readiness to allow our communal lives to be reshaped by the authority of suffering humanity. The courageous choice to remain, holding the sufferer's hand, implies a new sense of what counts as meaningful human life.

Human beings who are at life's beginning or end, or who for any reason function only marginally, usually do not have any voice. In our day, critical ethical decisions are being made by secular scientific, social and governmental authorities which do not take sufficient account of these suffering people. And large numbers of people, including 'Christian believers', find it difficult to maintain the point of view of the sufferer. It is the task of the theologian not only to take this point of view to heart, but to give a voice to these voiceless ones in the world of ethical decision-making. Theology has the task of listening to the experience of those who suffer and of those who accompany them, and of uncovering and articulating what they learn through such experience. Proclaiming this knowledge in a world fascinated with the merely empirical will be a matter of courageous invitations to conversion, and of the patient cultivation of wisdom. Such wisdom and conversion come only if we submit to suffering's 'critical, epistemic, and productive power'. In a Christmas sermon, Schillebeeckx puts it this way:

***The theologian's
task is to give
a voice to
the voiceless***

Really only those who have suffered, in *person* and in *others*, know what concern for fellow human beings and their society, what concern for more humanity, require of us.¹⁰

Kathleen McManus OP, a Dominican of Blauvelt, New York, is assistant professor of theology at the University of Portland, and holds a doctorate in Systematic Theology from the University of St Michael's College in Toronto. Her teaching interests include Christology, theological anthropology, and women's contextual theologies, especially in Latin America. She is currently researching the implications of a theology of suffering for ethics in situations where human life is threatened or diminished.

¹⁰ 'Christmas Meditation: "Being Made Man" (Matthew 2:13-21)', in *For the Sake of the Gospel*, translated by John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 45-49, here 48-49.