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[Home](#)
[About MID](#)
[Bulletins](#)
[News](#)
[Events](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Links](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Support MID](#)
[Benedict's Dharma](#)
[Gethsemani I](#)
[Gethsemani II](#)
[Gethsemani III](#)
[Abhishiktananda Society Bulletins](#)

[Help](#)

Fr. Columba Stewart: Discussion Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Fr. Damon Geiger, OSST, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Stephanie Kaza, Fr. Leo Lefebure, John Daido Looi, Ven. Samu Sunim, Fr. Julian von Duerbeck, OSB, Fr. James Wiseman, OSB, Danielle Witt, SSND, Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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Page 1 of 2

Dialogue after Columba Stewart's Presentation

Damon Geiger: I come from the Eastern Catholic Christian tradition. I was struck, in listening to the venerable teachers from so many traditions, of some corresponding ideas from our Eastern Christian tradition. If the whole purpose of the Church is communion, if the whole work that the Lord the Redeemer, did was to bring about communion, then the whole meaning of life is to enter into a communion of life and love with God, with one another, and with all of the cosmos. Therefore, all suffering would have to stem from somehow breaking the communion, abstaining from or leaving it. As within the Christian tradition, the worst thing that can happen is excommunication, being "out of communion." This would be based on the fact that we are created in the image of God, the Trinity, who is communion in himself. Maybe one of the problems we are having in our American or Western culture, as such it is now, is confusing the idea of person with individual. In the Trinity, there are not three individuals, there are three persons, and they are precisely who they are because they let go of themselves and exist in communion and are thus identified. Somehow much of our suffering and alienation is because we claim to be individuals, rather than simply allowing ourselves to become persons by surrendering to the greater communion.

Related Articles

- [Fr. Columba Stewart's Presentation \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)
- [Sr. Mary Margaret Funk's Presentation \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)

Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO, is a Trappist monk at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia.

[All articles by or about Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO](#)



Zoketsu Norman Fischer is a Soto Zen practitioner, teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, and founder of The Everyday Zen Foundation. He took part in both Gethsemani Encounters and was a

John Daido Loori: I had a question that I would appreciate if someone could clarify for me. It came up this morning when Ewert Cousins spoke of the alienation of Christ and then the transformation and then the resurrection. During our break, I dug around in the Bible that was in my room and read the different accounts of the crucifixion. They differ slightly, of course, but the question revolves around the transformation. It's clear that there was a sense of alienation when Christ said, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" Then after a period of time, right before his death, he said, "I commend my spirit to the kingdom of heaven," [Luke 23:46] or in some accounts, "It is finished" [John 19:30]. But the transformation is the big question for me, because it seems to me that here is a pivotal teaching. What was that transformation? How am I to understand that? Is there something that one of the Catholic practitioners can share with me to help me understand that, because here I think is something important?

Danielle Witt: In my own personal practice, the Buddhist practice of Tonglen has really helped me to open up the mystery of Jesus' suffering and death, his not closing down, his opening of his heart in the midst of that suffering. In the practice of Tonglen, it's the taking in hatred, aggression, fear, confusion, and giving out love and acceptance, openness and forgiveness, that is the mystery of transformation. It seems to me today in our world that there are so many ideas and new age philosophy, where everybody wants to take in the light and give out the darkness and get rid of the negativity. That, it seems to me, is exactly what we are doing in our continual pollution of the world: we take in the good and then we throw out what we don't want. For me, Jesus' transformative suffering is as essential for the survival of the planet as photosynthesis. That's what we are all called to do. For me that's why Jesus is a bodhisattva. It is through our willingness to open our hearts and transform the suffering, confusion, anger, and fear of this world into acceptance, love, and forgiveness that we will survive.

John Daido Loori: I understand how transformation works. I hate to be a pill about this, but what is it? What happened during that crucifixion that leads to the statement that there was first the alienation, then transformation, and then resurrection? I understand the resurrection. I understand the alienation. I don't see the clues to

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**All articles by or about
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**All articles by or about
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Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, is professor of theology at Conception Seminary College and a member of Conception Abbey,

the transformation other than the word transformation, and I don't know where that came from. Can anyone help me?

Leo Lefebure: In terms of the Gospel narratives, I think it's a mistake to take a line from two of the Gospels and then juxtapose them with lines in other Gospels and make a complete narrative and ask about the transformation. The line, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," is in Mark and Matthew. It's in not in Luke or John. That's the beginning of the Twenty-Second Psalm, and there are different ways to read it. One is that it is literally a cry of despair. On that model, Jesus, for Christians, as God himself, is entering into the worst depth of suffering, which means that God knows what it's like to feel abandoned by God. This means a divine identification with all victims throughout history, with all those who have the sense of God-forsakenness, that God is there. In the Gospel of Mark the whole text is filled with ironies. Those who follow Jesus don't know who he is. The ones who know who he is are the evil spirits, and he orders them to be silent. So there is this constant play of identity back and forth. The only person in the Gospel of Mark who acknowledges who Jesus is and is not rebuked is the Roman centurion who supervises his death. There is a multiple play of ironies.

The custom in Judaism at the time was that if one person said the first line of a psalm, the rest of the people would conclude it; like the Catholics saying, "Our Father," and everybody else joining in. If you go through the whole of the Twenty-Second Psalm, it begins with the cry of despair, but moves through it. In the psalm there is a sense of God's deliverance, and a transformation of the psalmist. So it's possible you could read it in that sense. In the Gospel of Luke, you don't have the cry of despair from the cross. Jesus prays to the Father to forgive the people who are killing him, and he dies, saying he returns his spirit to God: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" In the Gospel of John, there is no agony in the garden of Gethsemane. In the Gospel of John, as Thomas Keating mentioned last night, John paradoxically identifies the crucifixion of Jesus and his exultation. In a sense, the resurrection is already here. The crucifixion is the return of Jesus to the father. It's his complete act of self-giving. At one point in the Gospel, he does say earlier, "My soul is troubled now" [John 12:27]. But the overall mood in the passion narrative is complete self-possession and a complete gift of self, which means there is no anguished cry of

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abandonment from the cross. If you [John Daido Looi] are asking what Jesus himself went through, I think the proper answer is, we don't know. What we have are four literary expressions of faith from a generation or so later that express how early Christians entered into this mystery.

Julian von Duerbeck: Fr. Leo spoke what I wanted to say; that if you go to Psalm Twenty-Two, you see very clearly that this is a psalm of an innocent person reflecting on being attacked and giving a cry of anguish. But it finally goes to a sense of total vindication, trust in God, even the statement that, "Generations yet unborn will speak of the goodness God has done to me." Perhaps, as Father Leo was saying, the Gospel authors want us to see this prayer as being indicative of going from suffering to transformation.

Joseph Wong: I like your [John Daido Looi] question. I agree that on the cross we have the deepest sense of alienation of Jesus and also the most profound transformation. The combination of the two is a mystery. Perhaps here an artist can help us experience it. I visited a church in a small town outside the city of Rome called Nemi. There is the beautiful Lake Nemi, and alongside the lake is the small town called Nemi, where there is a church. Inside the church is a huge, ancient, wooden crucifix, and the peculiar aspect of that crucifix is people can look at it from two different angles. From one side, you see the agony, the profound suffering and pain of Jesus dying, struggling and in agony. But if you look at it from the other side, you see the face of Jesus in the midst of suffering but with perfect calm, serenity, surrender, and peace. But you still get a message of severe suffering. I think the artist did a wonderful job by combining these two aspects in the dying Jesus. On the one hand, the suffering was real. It was profound alienation and suffering, of being abandoned by all people, including his loving father. That's the only time when Jesus was not praying with the word, Father, but, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Of course, that's the beginning of Psalm Twenty-Two, but the realities, too, should be kept in mind.

It's interesting that Luke tried to balance the last words of Jesus, so Matthew and Mark had this quotation from the beginning of the psalm—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"—and Luke tried to bring out the other side of that inner state of Jesus with peaceful



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John Daido Looi is the founder and abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York.

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surrender at the end: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." John would say it differently: "It is finished." Everything has been accomplished. That struggle had actually already started in the prayer in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was asking his father to spare him from drinking the chalice, but immediately he added, "Not my will, but your will be done" [Matthew 26:39]. Where is the transformation? That was John Daido Looi's question. I think the transformation was in this surrender. Jesus felt the pain, sorrow, abandonment, and the chalice. At the same time, I think, he was able to see something greater than himself: "Not my will, mine, me; but your will." So he saw something greater than the self. That's the father.

In the New Testament, the death of Jesus is always interpreted as the profound, supreme act of obedience to the father. But the obedience is not to a capricious God who delights in the suffering of his son. It's a loving father who gave up his son for the salvation of humankind. In this obedience to the father Jesus also sees the greater picture of suffering humanity. I think that's the transformation. There is something greater than himself—the father's will. That includes the liberation, redemption, and salvation of all humanity. Jesus was able to make the act of surrender through the power of the Holy Spirit. That is the beginning of the transformation, starting in the garden of Gethsemane, completed on the cross, and finally completed by the resurrection itself: the whole process of transformation.

Norman Fischer: What I was hearing in your [John Daido Looi] question was something very practical. In other words, there is suffering and there is transformation. That I understand. How do you get from one to the other? In our Buddhist tradition it's very practical. I've been spending time with the psalms, and from my reading of Psalm Twenty-Two, I get that the answer on a practical level as to how one gets there, or how Jesus got there, is that there is a profound and total acceptance and owning of suffering, and then crying out, whether it's in an inner way or literally with the voice—the feeling of being heard in the crying out, of being heard, that then effects the transformation. The psalmist in Psalm Twenty-Two charts the depths of possible human suffering, then a sense of being heard, and then being held in that suffering that effects the liberation. In a way, the path is to suffer and completely give up any resistance whatsoever to suffering, and then to be met in that. I think we could all easily understand that



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in terms of our own path, don't you think?

John Daido Looi: I would express it as taking responsibility for the suffering.

Norman Fischer: In a total way.

John Daido Looi: Right. So you become it with the whole body and mind.

[Next Page >>](#)

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