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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk: Discussion Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Rev. Thomas Baima, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Joseph Goldstein, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Henepole Gunaratana, Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, Fr. Leo Lefebure, John Daido Looi, Br. Paul Quenon, OCSO, Judith Simmer-Brown, Geshe Sopa, Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB, Ajahn Sundara, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Fr. James Wiseman, OSB

from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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Dialogue after Sr. Mary Margaret Funk's Presentation

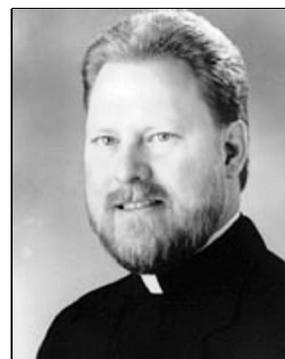
Judith Simmer-Brown: So, Sister Meg, the word "love" is loaded positively and negatively. What is love?

Mary Margaret Funk: I got a Christmas card from Don Bernardo, who is the superior general of the Trappists. I had sent him a copy of *Tools Matter* and he wrote a foreword in Spanish on *Thoughts Matter*. His Christmas card said to me, "Meg, your third book has to be *Love Matters*." So I think that's what I have to figure out. I think I will take a moment to show the shift here. Mary Gerald shifted from ordinary consciousness to a Christ consciousness. I should have added that she had started centering prayer. Thomas Keating had been at our place three times, and we had worked on an interior practice. I don't think she had an interior practice all those years in the kitchen. She was doing apostolic love. I think her shift was an interior consciousness that there was mystery and more than meets the eye, and that she was to mediate love through food.

Judith Simmer-Brown: I'm not going to let you off with that. Let me put my question another way. In my work with my own students, I feel

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that unrealistic expectations associated with “love” are the cause of incredible suffering. To bring it back to the topic of suffering, when you say “love,” it sounds that for you that resolves all difficulty, but it does not for me. I’m asking a little more clarification of what you mean by “love.” How is that an expression of the transformation?

Mary Margaret Funk: This is where questions really help us all, because I think “love” can be a word that is a stopper rather than a starter. We’ve never used that language together, Sister Mary Gerald and myself. I would say that through the practice of the Rule and listening in dialogue with the virtues of silence, humility, and obedience, what we were trying to do is to remove the obstacles to her being loving while she had this ministry in the kitchen, and that it kind of did a reversal on her. Her obedience was to be loving. She happened to have food as the medium. To be loving in an apostolic way, she was preparing food for these people seven days a week at the Hermitage. Now, working under these difficult conditions, she was lovingly working under obedience and being loving herself and then loving them, starting from the inside. It’s the Christian thing to be too much out there, just saying whatever we do is love. I think Sister Mary Gerald learned that she had to be loving, and that that was the number one priority rather than getting the food on the table. Does that help?

Judith Simmer-Brown: So how does loving relate to suffering? It seems that the word “loving” makes it sound like it’s always easy and joyful. Aspiring to something that has such a positive expectation for people is often a very difficult leap. It’s a little bit like what Daido Roshi was asking a few minutes ago, earlier. What does loving look like, and how does it relate to the experience of suffering?

Mary Margaret Funk: I think in this case, she herself had to be the lover. She had to be the Christ. Again, food was a trick for her, and she couldn’t place her suffering in the world through the food. Her suffering was that she wasn’t very loving. Again, she underwent this suffering of being prejudiced and hostile. This is where we would use the Cassian thoughts: food, sex, things, anger. She really had anger and pride. Those feelings were in the way of her being loving to these other coworkers, but she had tricked herself that food was the object. However, if love is our object, if love is our way, our apostolic love; and more than just a trick, it is the way we are Christ and that person is



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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, was the executive director of the MID board from 1989-2004. She was prioress at Our Lady of

Christ. This is just the way it is for us. As I hear you talking about illusion, this is our faith. So to get into the faith of who she was, and to express that love, she had to do it through her service of food—but to be loving to these people directly. Is that okay? What I mean by “apostolic love” is love that is expressed through service. It comes out of the Gospel mandate that we must love others and love others in service and compassion. Usually when we use it loosely like that, it’s kind of external duty rather than an interior disposition of really consciously watching our thoughts and doing the loving thing and being more specific.

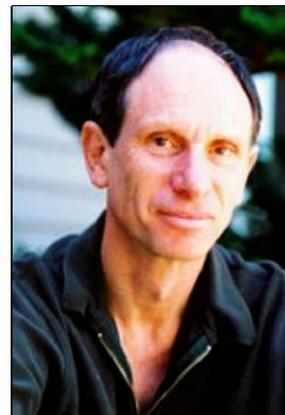
Donald Grabner: I think one of our Zen Buddhist brothers or sisters can elaborate on this more easily than I, but Meg’s story reminded me that the great Japanese Zen Master Dogen has a disquisition on the role of the cook. He, himself, attributes his own enlightenment to a Chinese cook, and this enlightenment led to compassion or to love. Maybe the wisdom/love tradition gets united there in a way that might show us some correspondences between these two traditions.

Geshe Sopa: When we say “love”—“I love this food. I love this person. I love God. I love my job”—we are talking about some kind of happiness we are getting from them. But is this love? I love this and that—Jesus, God, religion, prayer, food, clothing, shelter, or person—but can we define any of them as love? Buddhists often say that attachment is love. What is the difference between attachment or love? If you distinguish them, you might say that love is the purer side, and attachment the less pure side. But what is the difference between loving food and being attached to it, loving a person and being attached to them, loving God and being attached to him? I want somebody to make that distinction—if there is one?

Thomas Baima: Following up on Professor Simmer-Brown’s question about love, perhaps another way to try to get at it relates back to what Father Damon Geiger said earlier in calling to mind the Eastern Christian tradition and the notion of communion between persons. One way to answer your question [Judith Simmer-Brown] is to talk about a definition of love that is contemplative. One image that I have heard Benedictines use frequently to describe the contemplative life or the contemplative stage of prayer is the idea of two people who are in relationship with each other being so comfortable they can simply sit in

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All articles by or about Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB



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All articles by or about Joseph Goldstein



Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB,

silence. No words need to be exchanged. Nothing needs to be said. The presence alone is sufficient. So I might offer a short response to your question of what love is by saying it is a relation between persons without agenda.

Joseph Goldstein: I would like to add a P.S. to that and jump into this dialogue. It's actually something that came up in one of our conversations as we were working on Benedict's Dharma, and in some way I think it's a question of language and translation. I would suggest that love and emptiness are the same thing. In Buddhist terms, if you [Meg] had said that she [Sister Mary Gerald] discovered emptiness, it would have resonated completely. From the Buddhist side, sometimes when we hear the word "love" it's infused with self and attachment. I don't think that is what is meant in the way you are using it. So I think it's a question of language.

John Daido Looi: P.P.S. to that. Maybe a way of expressing it is "intimacy." Intimacy means no separation, which is essentially emptiness, the same thing. It's a word that we favor.

Father Paul from Gethsemani: It seems that a mystic like John of the Cross made a supreme effort to distinguish between attachment and love. In his sense, love requires detachment, and therefore that it's a kind of emptiness. You don't love the other person for your own sake or for some gratification that you get, but you love the person for their sake. There is a humility that you, yourself, have to have an emptiness on your own part in order to be able to love.

Ajahn Sundara: Sister Meg: In your presentation you brought in a particular structure that comes from the Benedictine Rule, which I'm not very familiar with. You presented it in a way that was very clear. At the same time, I missed the sort of messy bits you find in alienation and low self-esteem, which can be quite chaotic and painful. I wondered, from your own experience, what you do with that in your community?

Mary Margaret Funk:

That messiness is one of the steps of humility. The manifestation of thoughts is part of that process [of dealing with the messiness]. You try to notice the first arising of that direction that is taking you away from

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Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, is

your baptismal call, as we Christians would say. You Buddhists would say you are taking refuge in Buddha. Christians would say that thoughts arise that are an obstacle to God, so we manifest those thoughts. Usually those thoughts are anger and, rage, but it is very messy. I met eighteen months with Sister Mary Gerald, and I've met fifty-nine years with Meg Funk. What I was getting to is, in the Rule, silence, humility, and obedience are the ways through the messiness. I didn't do a scenario [for working through the process] because after you do it over and over again it doesn't matter what the scenario is. It could be the kitchen. It could be a relationship. Whenever these thoughts rise you return to your prayer, to the presence of Christ. So, it really doesn't matter what the occasion is. It's always the same dynamic of the thoughts rising and then returning to prayer, and then the experience and dynamic of being in God's presence. When you are feeling alienated you don't feel like God or you are praying. But you are removing the obstacles to this presence with which you are in relationship. Its presence is bigger than a one-to-one conversation. And that is the suffering, too. It is being in the kitchen with the bigger eyes watching me do what I am doing, working my heart with silence, humility, and obedience. The self-talk is really trying to stay close to Christ

Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.): From the Buddhist perspective, I would like to add to what has already been said. It is unconditional friendship. When we have unconditional friendship, the occasion, situation, person, or geographical area are all unimportant. Everything becomes secondary when real unconditional friendship is at work. This is what we try to promote as our very fundamental practice to counterbalance our suffering. Since we all share suffering equally, we also want to have something to overcome it. Suffering doesn't have a particular condition, area, religion, and so forth. Every living being suffers. If you want to overcome that suffering, you also have to have something as powerful or more powerful than suffering. That is love, which has no condition. That is friendship. That is what we all can come together under as all living beings—sharing with and caring for one another.

Leo Lefebure: I resonate very strongly with that, Bhante. If I can frame it a little differently in the Christian tradition, one of the ways that Christians have named this deep suffering of unworthiness is

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shame. And sometimes people have looked on shame as one of the primordial manifestations of what Christians call original sin, this warping of our nature. Shame is not simply something we've done that is wrong, but that there is something flawed about who we are, which in a sense is a lie that prompts us to do all kinds of unhealthy, demonic things at times. In Christianity, the primary response is to take seriously that God loves us unconditionally. Perhaps the term "friendship" would be better. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants but my friends," which in Greek culture was revolutionary, because you couldn't be friends with a god, because a god was at a higher level. But Jesus calls us friends, precisely with all our flaws and failings.

The story of one person's transformation may help direct this back toward Samu Sunim's question from this morning, too, in terms of where is God in suffering. A number of years ago, a young priest in Central America, Oscar Romero, had struggled with perfectionism. He had this very rigid standard of how he was supposed to be, and a tremendous sense of his own unworthiness, a sense of shame, and he threw himself into his work. He ended up being diagnosed by a psychiatrist as having an obsessive-perfectionist disorder and was told all kinds of different things. He tried even harder to get it right. He threw himself into his work all the more. His relationships with other people suffered. It seemed to be going nowhere. He had always been, in a sense, safe, concerned with what other people think, and so was chosen to be archbishop of El Salvador, precisely because he was a safe candidate. There were any number of people trying to engage the church on the side of the poor who were very controversial.

A few weeks after he was named archbishop, a Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande was killed with a couple of companions precisely because of his work for the poor. That night Oscar Romero gathered in the church where the bodies of these three persons were lying, and he looked on them and saw something he had never seen before. Later, he didn't want to call this a conversion experience, but something changed. He looked at those bodies and he saw the presence of Christ. He asked the people who were gathered there, many of them friends of the people who were slain, "Where do we go from here?" From that point on his whole life changed. He saw Christ in the suffering poor in El Salvador. He took up the image of the suffering servant from the second part of

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the book of Isaiah, which originally is a personification of the people of Israel during the Babylonian captivity—despised, humiliated, shamed by all the other more powerful nations. They are the ones on whom God's favor rests, and it is through them that blessings come to nations. Christians understood this in terms of the life of Jesus. Oscar Romero took this image and applied it to the suffering poor in El Salvador.

From then on, the struggle for perfectionism was gone. All the worry about getting it right, about pleasing people, about acceptance, was gone. He began speaking the truth as he saw it and did not care about the consequences. He was certainly warned many times before finally he was murdered at the altar and became one of the great witnesses. In a Christian sense, in one way or another, we all struggle with the sense that there is something wrong with us. Often the answer is first a realization that God loves us with all our imperfections and, secondly, a concrete concern for someone else that pulls us out of a kind of obsession with ourselves.

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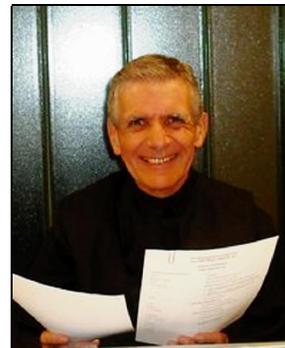
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