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Fr. Donald Grabner: Discussion Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Joseph Goldstein, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Gray Henry, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Fr. Julian von Duerbeck, OSB, Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam

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

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Joseph Wong: I would like to share a story about the transforming power of sickness. One member of our community, the same person whom I referred to this morning when I mentioned the old, dying brother with whom I was trying to say the Jesus prayer at his death bed, was a kind of legend in our community. He was Brother Phillip, and he was of German decent, very hard working, conservative in his faith, very strict in his monastic observance, very demanding towards himself and others. Nothing escapes. He was hard worker until the age of 80. And he would often challenge members of the community who did not live up to the monastic standard according to his understanding. He was a kind of a terror to the community. You'd hardly see a smile on his face. He was always serious.

At the end of his seventies, he got sick and had a serious operation, from which he almost died. However, he was not able to walk anymore. He had to use a wheelchair, and was pushed along here and there by somebody. This was very painful for him. He was used to being in control of everything, and now he had lost control. He was a hard worker, but was not able to work. He wanted to do things by himself; but now he was being pushed along. And that wasn't enough; he was still struggling to accept that situation. What was worse was that he was a veteran, so he was treated in a Veterans Administration (VA)

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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 Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana and is the author of a number of books, including *Thoughts Matter* and *Islam Is . . .*

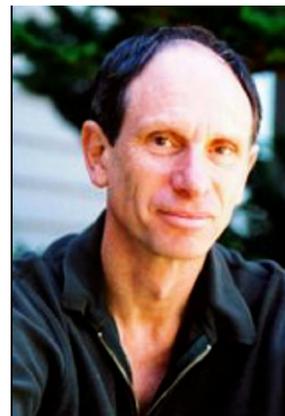
All articles by or about Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB

Hospital. There was a nun in the VA Hospital who took care of him, and had compassion on this old monk, and was willing to come on weekends even when he was released back to our hermitage in Big Sur.

This nurse was a very big woman in her early fifties. She was very caring, loving, self-sacrificing, but also intransigent and unyielding. Two strong personalities met, Brother Phillip and this nurse, Helen. At the beginning, there were many quarrels between the two of them. But this woman never yielded. She was loving and self-sacrificing, but never yielded. She demanded a certain schedule, a way of taking medicine, and so on. Gradually Brother Phillip saw the good heart of this woman, was touched, and gave in. This was the second loss of control—first to the illness, and then even his life schedule. All his attachment was gone. He was totally powerless. He had totally lost control at the end of illness and at the hands of this powerful nurse.

From that moment on we saw a total transformation in Brother Phillip. He lived for about another ten years and died on the threshold of his ninetieth birthday. During his illness, I was not able to imagine how people said he used to be the terror of the community. What we saw was a smiling face, calm, serene, and peaceful. I never heard a harsh word from this man who used to be the terror of the community. He had a brother assigned to help him every day and we would push his wheelchair to the dining room at lunchtime, and then for the Eucharist, and then in the evening we took a walk. We pushed him around the garden and so on. Then every evening, we would prepare supper for him and put him to bed. And we would take turns doing that.

His supper was standard and never changed. Porridge with half a banana and no sugar. He never said a word: If it was to his taste, he would finish it. If he didn't like it, he would just take half of it and leave it there, but he never complained. He never said, "Brother, could you prepare it in a better way?" He would either finish it or leave half of it. When it was my turn, I didn't know what he did to the others. I thought he always finished everything. I never microwaved the porridge. I boiled it and brought it to him. And he always finished everything, and I cleaned the container and so on. One evening he jokingly said,



Joseph Goldstein is the co-founder of Insight Meditation Society and The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts. He was involved in both Gethsemani Encounters.

[All articles by or about Joseph Goldstein](#)



Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, is professor of theology at Conception Seminary College and a member of Conception Abbey, Conception, Missouri. He contributed to both Gethsemani Encounters.

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"Brother, I think you are the second best in preparing my supper, but I'm still looking for the best."

This for me is a total transformation from illness. He was, I think, fully redeemed in the last ten years of his life, and he is still a popular legend of the community—the famous Brother Phillip.

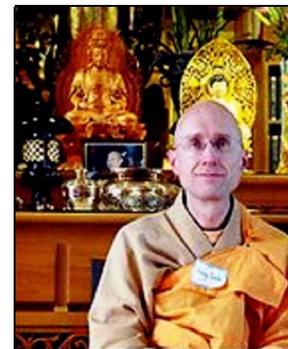
Gray Henry: I'll continue in the same vein as the brother on the transformative aspects of illness. Fourteen years ago I was paralyzed for a year. That meant I couldn't scratch or shift position in bed. I'll tell you how it stopped. I didn't complain—you surrender to something like that. It became finally something I couldn't pray to end because its goodness outweighed its bad, because I was at last centered and at peace. There was nothing left to do. People were kind and prayed and brought holy water. I was taken to the Middle East for the winter because it was warm there. (I was living in England.) I asked some of the ladies there, "How do you view illness of this Job-kind of magnitude?" They said, "We consider all illness a great blessing from God, because it is intended to purify you of any last small bad thing you do." (In that part of the world, if you say to someone, "How are you," and they have a broken leg or dead baby or whatever, all they say is, "Alleluia. All praises due to God," and they'll never tell you how they are.)

I was thinking about this, and I thought, "Well, I've really been blessed." I was completely paralyzed. I could only suck through a straw. I couldn't chew an apple or anything. The worst thing was never being able to scratch or shift. The pain was great. All of a sudden I realized that instead of tolerating this illness—I had been like a stick in the stream—I suddenly loved God's will for me because he had honored me with something that big. The second I flowed with the illness and with his will, my fingers began to move. That was the first lesson. That was fourteen years ago.

Seven years ago I had a major heart attack, and lying in bed I very carefully wrote in very bad handwriting my will. It was great to get everything out of the way. When they said they wanted to operate on me, I refused because I felt free. I already had a plane ticket to go to

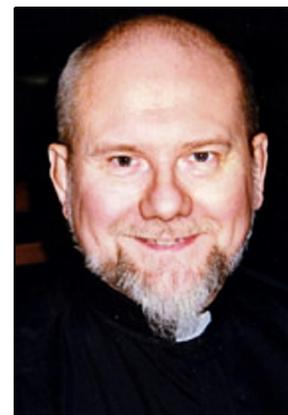
Gray Henry is founder and trustee of the Islamic Texts Society and former director of Quinta Essentia Publications. She currently directs Fons Vitae Press and is a consulting editor for Parabola.

[All articles by or about Gray Henry](#)



Reverend Heng Sure has been an ordained Buddhist monk in the Chan lineage of China since 1976. He is the director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery.

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Santa Fe to a wedding, and I thought, "Well, I'll do that. And then if I live, I'll do this operation." I was now reduced to hardly being able to walk or speak, and it was wonderful talking quietly and moving softly. Since I couldn't do anything, I went out and sat in the desert for the day. There were autumn leaves and golden flowering plants. I had surrendered. You know the phrase, "If you don't go below sea level, the ocean can't pour in." Well, I had gone below. I was just sitting there, and all of a sudden time stopped. It was, in Sanskrit, sachidananda, "being consciousness bliss." There was nothing but infinite luminous being. There was no past and no future. It's everything I've always wanted. I sat there for that day, and it was the deathless state. I realized there isn't any death.

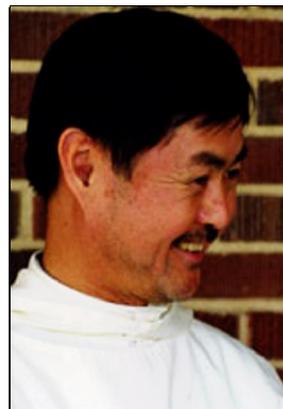
Then, last Monday, I had a biopsy for a tumor in my neck, and they had to do it without anesthesia. I was prepared. Cancer is worse than the other stuff because it gets loose everywhere. I was trying to think, "How am I going to view this?" Then I thought that when God or the divine creates this manifestation, it becomes duality. There is night and day and male and female and life and death. I thought, "What happens when you stop the past or the future, which are all in your thoughts?" You are left with the divine present, so that the past and the future cancel each other out. So I thought death and life must cancel each other out because they are duality, and then you are left only in the divine presence. The surgeons began to operate. I used my rosary or mala and just held them like a chain thrown to a drowning person. I took my mind and went into my heart and invoked God to myself. I discovered I was down literally in my heart; and I could look back up at the surgeons, working on me, and it seemed like they were operating on the carcass of a stranger. This was a very valuable lesson because what will come next will be worse. But I've got a method now, and it seems to work.

Donald Grabner: We are experiencing God in some way that is ineffable, and our attempts to speak about it are always going to be inadequate. We have to try to feel or open ourselves up to the experience and recognize the inadequacy of our words.

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**All articles by or about
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