

Lutheran Counseling Network

Faith and Everyday Life, 2023

January

Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. (Romans 12:12)

We've all heard of post-traumatic stress. But have you heard of post-traumatic growth? Post traumatic growth happens when we have endured a traumatic event or crisis and we learn from it, grow from it, move on from it, and become even better versions of ourselves because of it.

The idea of the transformational power hidden in suffering is not new. For thousands of years the meaning of human suffering has been pondered by philosophers, scientists and people of faith.

In current times, positive psychology (the science of happiness) studies resilience, shifting from surviving to thriving. Post traumatic growth is a key element in this process, contributing to overall well-being.

In American nun Joan Chittister's book *Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope*, she writes, "Hope is to believe that God stands on this dark road waiting to walk with us toward new light again. We can begin to build a new life when death comes. We can reach out to make friends with others rather than curl up, hurt and angry, waiting for someone to come to us. We can allow ourselves to love again. We can allow ourselves to cultivate new joys, new interests ... We can decide to go through life with open hands rather than to trap ourselves inside a heart closed to everything but the past."

Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. God is ready to take your hand and lead you from the dark road of your suffering toward new light. To transform your trauma into resilience. To open you up to new experience, bring you new joys, and help you learn to live and love again.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

February

*Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live,
and let me not be put to shame in my hope. (Psalm 119:116)*

I've been reflecting on the rigidities of habits, thoughts and behaviors that distract us from keeping the law.... From properly giving to God what is God's. So often what I see, both in myself and in my therapy clients, is that when we fail to do the right thing or when we choose to do the wrong thing, it is often not so much a motivation issue as it is a transportation problem. Let me explain.

There are many parts of our Self that help us make decisions, run a life, pursue excellence or joy, and love well and deeply. Perhaps you've noticed that sometimes, when you talk to yourself about how to proceed in a given situation, the internal dialogue will sound something like: "Part of me thinks .. And another part of me wonders ... And then, another part of me just wants ..." In the absence of severe chemical imbalance or mental illness, these parts of Self are a normal, natural part of an adult personality. And different parts of the Self take different roles at different times in different settings. So, for example, normally and naturally, when we're playing a game we love, the part of us that is curious and loves games will take leadership.

One way to look at our challenges in keeping covenant with our God, is to think about what part of us takes leadership in what areas of our life. I encourage you to think and pray with me today and in the upcoming days about the part of you that leads you in the Good. Think about the areas of your life where you are performing well; where you are proud of your actions, your ethical stance and the way you love.

Now think about the parts of your life where there are challenges for you in right living, in ethical thinking, and behavior. Perhaps you avoid the pain by choosing an easy path.

What you're experiencing in these places of challenge might be seen as a problem in transporting the part of your Self you need to the situation at hand. This could be a moment to prayerfully ask God: What part of me do I need to take charge in this situation? And then to ask God to strengthen this part, encourage this part to take leadership. And perhaps to ask God to curb the tendencies of a part that tends to take charge and lead you astray. In this way, you pray with the psalmist, "Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope."

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

March

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick;
but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life. (Proverbs 13:12)*

How, when hope is deferred, can we keep our heart from getting sick or grieved?

Strong's Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon defines "hope" as "expectation." That's got some meat on it: if I expect something, it means I have faith it will happen. Expectation deferred means the arrival is drawn out, prolonged.

We can lean into God when hope is deferred because God is faithful (Heb. 10:23). Our part is to hold "fast" to God's promises (keep, possess, retain, seize on). We are to *know* what is ours in Christ and not let it be wrest away, not by forces that come against us nor by temptation in our own minds to waning belief or discouragement.

And we don't have to do this alone, "for God is able to succor them that are tempted." (Heb 2:18. Latin *sucorro* = to run to the aid of!)

Perhaps more importantly we need to hold fast to knowing who God is on our behalf. The many names of God¹ illuminate God's nature and fullness.

"Elohim": One who is in covenant-relationship with Creation and will not abandon it, nor leave it or forsake it. God's covenant promises stand firm forever. God's all in!

"Jehovah": One who is truth and righteousness. God's is the highest righteousness: while it judges sin, it can never rest until it also makes the sinner righteous. God's righteousness is for us, not against us.

"El Shaddai": The All-Bountiful One. God is the true Giver of life, Who pours out God's very self, God's nature, to all who believe.

It is worth researching the many names of God and meditating on them, to know deeply for ourselves Who knows us each by name, Who never grows tired or weary no matter what our circumstances look like, Who succors us when hope is deferred. The fullness of God is ready for our every situation!

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

¹ "The Names of God: Discovering God as He Desires to be Known" by Andrew Jukes (1967)

April

*... but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31)*

There are moments in our lives that stick with us, and they stick in a spiritual sense. I was driving my car in Montana. I guess it could have been anywhere, but the big sky nature of Montana makes this sight seem even rarer. The moment was brief because we were traveling in a car and the passenger and I were both looking out the front window. We saw an adult bird -- likely a hawk -- with a smaller bird on its back. The larger bird dipped down, letting the young bird free fall. Then the adult bird caught the young bird on its back and kept flying. We saw this happen two times. We both shook our heads and said, "Wait, what was that?"

I have long looked for a parallel in Scripture to this vision-without-words. The closest I have come to the feeling of that moment is Psalm 91: God is "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." I often wonder how many of those moments I have encountered with the Holy One catching me and asking me to trust. I am sure I cannot even count them.

How about you? How is God teaching you to trust?

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

May

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. (Romans 8:28)

This devotion picks up the theme of post-traumatic growth we began exploring in January.

Trauma can leave us feeling hopeless, like life will never be the same. But with God's help, we can turn post-traumatic stress into post-traumatic growth. Sometimes therapy can help us find the way forward after trauma. Other times we may find our own path to resilience and growth, with God's help.

So how do you know if you have experienced post traumatic growth? Below are just a handful of statements that reflect post-traumatic growth. Think of a trauma or crisis you have endured and ask yourself if any of the statements resonates with you:

1. I changed my priorities about what is most important in my life.
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.
3. I developed new interests.
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance.
5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters.
6. I can count on people in times of trouble.
7. I established a new path for my life.
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others.
9. I am more willing to express my emotions.
10. I know that I can better handle difficulties.

Post traumatic growth involves life changing shifts in the way we view the world, others, and ourselves. It is a process of positive change that is deeply meaningful.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.

To learn more about post-traumatic growth, reach out to an LCN therapist.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

June

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord; plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

This verse pairs nicely with another of my favorites: “Do not be anxious for anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7)

In psychology we talk about building a firewall between stress factors, which are beyond our control, and stress reactions, which are within our ability to control. We do this in two ways: physical relaxation and healthy self-talk. We can relax and let God’s peace come into our bodies because God is in charge. For the Christian, self-talk becomes prayer talk—supplication with thanksgiving.

Relying on God and God’s plans for us in this way helps us look forward to a future with hope!

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

July

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

Hope is essential in order for humans to thrive. Yet, hope can be hard to come by at times. I know this firsthand through the many very personal griefs and sorrows shared in my counseling office. Relationships fail. Loved ones die. Dreams are lost. Chronic illness robs quality of life.

What is hope, anyway? Is it related to the joy and gratitude that can be found when the sun comes out on a beautiful northwest day, or when our life circumstances flow together without much difficulty, or when we sing the Hallelujah Chorus with vigor on Easter Sunday? Yes, certainly. The hope we feel in such moments is real and sustaining, and provides a foreshadowing of our heavenly hope for a time when sorrow will be no more.

Sometimes, however, I think hope is a far grittier thing, and something hard won. Sometimes we barely cling to hope by our fingernails, as we feel tossed about about in a sea of emotional turmoil or personal trials. Sometimes hope eludes us entirely during our darkest days, and we may need of the support of someone who can hold onto hope for us when we cannot.

Each year when we tire of the dark and gloomy days of northwest rain that seem to last for months, we may also recall that the sun is literally just behind the clouds. It can't be seen yet, and it may yet be a while until it makes its appearance. However, it *is* there, and it is more stalwartly constant than the clouds which occupy our vision.

If you are living amidst a lingering time of dark clouds, and have forgotten what the sun looks and feels like, please know that the sun *is* still present. And may we as the community of faith remember and hold onto that hope for those among who at this time cannot. Amen.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

August

Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off. (Proverbs 23: 18)

When couples come to therapy, things can look awfully bleak. There may be intense conflict that has raged for years. There may be resigned distance. There is often lack of hope that change is possible.

But something has brought them in that door. Some glimmer of hope that things could be different. It is that glimmer of hope that lights the way to change in therapy.

Whether we use the name of Christ in the therapy room or not, Christ is present in that glimmer of hope. Christ points the way to change. Christ helps couples begin to understand each other and risk lowering their protections with one another. Christ helps them reveal their true feelings, and opens them to experiencing each other differently.

It can be this way for each of us. Trusting in Christ, we can receive and embrace that glimmer of hope that things could be different. We can trust Christ to light our way, and begin step by step to embrace change, lower our protections, and reach out to others. We can begin to take risks and have new experiences. In all of this, Christ is present, leading us forward, guiding our steps, helping us change and grow toward a future full of hope.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

September

We boast in our afflictions ... (Romans 5:1-5)

In this passage God turns affliction to endurance, endurance to character, character to hope. “And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:5).

The way God can transform affliction into hope is a mystery, one we glimpse from time to time in our lives and in the lives of others. A man I know has been through two very serious cancer treatments, and appears to be in remission. He is the only one who knows the suffering he has experienced — being bedridden, chemotherapy, bone cell transplant, pain, isolation, fear — but he always maintained hope that he could be healed and restored to his loved ones and his work. Today he is back to his family and his career. And he has a depth of moral and spiritual character that only seems attainable by someone who has endured the kind of suffering he has.

What affliction do you bear? How might God be turning your affliction into endurance? Your endurance into character? Your character into hope?

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

October

I wait for the Lord; my whole being waits, and in his word I hope. (Psalm 130:5)

The psalmist in Psalm 130 cries from “out from the depths (v. 1)” of pain, anguish, alienation. Despairing over his own sin. Many of us know what that’s like. We look inside and all we find is emptiness, brokenness, failure. Focusing inward this way can lead to hopelessness, despair, depression. It’s easy to get stuck there. No way out, no hope, no escape.

But God meets us in this place of hopelessness. In fact, God is the answer to this hopelessness. The Psalmist understood this. In the Psalmist’s view, God is coming as surely as the morning (v. 6). The Psalmist waits for God in faith, with his whole being (v. 5) – body and soul.

And what does the Psalmist do while he waits? He reflects on God’s promises: to be in Covenant relationship with us (Leviticus 26:12-13); to love us no matter what (1 Chronicles 16:34); to be near whenever we pray (Deuteronomy 4:7); to give us comfort in our trials (2 Corinthians 1:3-4); to give us new life in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). And these are just a few of the many promises of God recorded in Scripture!

When we wait for the Lord and trust in God’s promises the way we trust in the coming of morning, we regain our focus. Instead of getting stuck focusing on the ways we don’t measure up, we refocus on God’s love for us. The transforming power of God’s love fills up our emptiness and takes us out of ourselves. We can’t stay stuck. Our cup overflowing with God’s love and grace, we shift out of ourselves to share this love and grace with others.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

November

*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. (Psalm 42:11)*

This verse describes a state of depression: Cast down, disquieted within. The depressed person looks down, not up; his inner emotional state is disturbed, sad, and hopeless. In depression, there is a kind of giving up on life, of learned helplessness.

Like other psalms, this passage is one that demonstrates the intersection of good psychology and good theology. We use the principles and strategies of psychology and medicine to treat depression. Sometimes we see relief of symptoms through cognitive therapy, grief and loss therapy, problem-solving or healing of a relationship. Then there is positive psychology—what one writer has coined “learned optimism.” It is revealed in the statement, “I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” Good psychology, good theology!

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

December

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Apprehensions and anxiety can rob us of joy and peace in life. We can't relax and enjoy the present. Instead we worry about the future, caught up in anticipating every conceivable consequence, large and small. We miss the good moments of our life as we fret over a future we can't control.

God invites us to lay down our worries and burdens. God wants to carry them for us. The hard part can be letting them go. But when we can trust God enough to lay down our worries – by writing them in a journal or imagining them as clouds floating across the sky – God is more than able to carry them, and us.

When we release our worries to God, we find peace and joy in the present moment. We notice a bird watching us from a telephone line. We see a sunset that fills the sky with color. We feel the touch of a loved one's hand. We live our moments to the fullest, trusting in God, who fills us with joy and peace.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network