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THE MARK

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FORTY DAYS OF GRACE

by Tim Cook

The churches my family attended when I was a boy were simple and unadorned. We were Midwestern Protestants and our worship services were as plain and uncomplicated as the buildings that held them. As I remember it now the messages we got in church and in vacation Bible school were mainly about our behavior and Jesus' love for us. It was utterly simple and straightforward.

My best friend Pat, who lived down the street, was a Catholic and though my family didn't talk about it much at home, it was understood that the things Pat's family did in their church were just a bit strange. But they never seemed stranger than during the 40 day period that led up to Easter. I learned about this one day when Pat showed up for play with dirt on his forehead. When I pointed it out to him so he could clean it off, he told me that "Father" had put it there on purpose because it was Ash Wednesday. I did not pursue the subject any further because it seemed so odd and because religion

was just something we didn't talk about outside of church. But that wasn't the end of it because the unusual behavior my buddy exhibited got stranger yet when he refused to share the Tootsie Roll I offered him. He said it was because he had given up candy for Lent. I didn't even ask him what that was all about. It just seemed weird and I avoided the subject entirely.

During my teenage years I attended church regularly, but not of my own free will. I did not find it relevant or interesting, but I went because my parents made me. I did have choices, though. I could either attend the teen group or the church service. I usually chose the church service, slumping down in a balcony seat with several of my similarly bored friends. As soon as I left for college, I quit attending church altogether.

During the next 15 years it stayed that way, with the exception of a couple of weddings and funerals. I did, however, find my mind stimulated and my heart opened by other religions. I joined

the Baha'i faith for a couple of years. I also studied Buddhism and the Vedic religions and became deeply involved in a community that followed the teaching of the Santana Dharma, the Eternal Way. I had a guru and received initiation into meditation. I loved religion and communal spirituality, but it never even remotely occurred to me that I would return to Christianity.

Yet I've not only returned to Christianity, I've returned to a form of Christian worship that has much in common with the Catholic influence that had seemed so strange when I was a kid. I've experienced a great deal of personal spiritual development and my capacity to understand Christianity has grown through my Eastern experience. Christianity itself, founded and grounded on the Incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, has always been growing and developing. It is, in fact, constantly being discovered at deeper and more profound levels

as humanity is increasingly capable of bearing its deepest gifts.

As we can see from reading the Epistles in the New Testament, Christianity, from its earliest days, has been in dialogue with Christ Himself. Christ has always been revealing ever new insights and understandings that then emerge into the stream of Christian awareness through intentional communities and saintly individuals. There never has been a box called “Christianity” that could be pointed to, saying, “There it is, that’s it.” History is replete with the records of arguments and schisms, Reformations and counter-Reformations. Christ meets each generation and each person right where they are with just what is needed to enter into ever deepening relationship with His personal presence.

As I’m writing this article it is mid-January and I am sitting here looking forward with eager anticipation to February 10th, Ash Wednesday, and the rich and fruitful 40 days of Lent that follow. My early

Protestant biblical roots have been enlivened and inspired by the rich and fruitful liturgical traditions that have been developed and held in trust by the Catholic religion that my family found so odd when I was a boy. What I’ve learned to honor and appreciate is the way these traditions invite us to do so much more than simply observe Christmas and Easter as we did when I was a boy. They invite us to participate.

The Lenten season opens wide the door of opportunity, inviting each of us to join Christ in the desert experience. It makes space in our lives for the spirit to touch us and open us to personal participation in the miracle of Easter and resurrected life. I’ve been actively living out the Lenten offering for more than 25 years now, and each year I look forward to it and the many blessings that come from it with more and more eagerness. I’ve learned how to let go of more than just Tootsie Rolls and candy.

Each year I pray and ask for

guidance as to what would be the most spiritually powerful way to make space in my life for deeper awareness of God’s presence. For a few years it was TV, but since I don’t watch it much anymore that got to be kind of a hollow gesture. Then it was Internet news sites. That was difficult but oh how it blessed me to find so much room for the Spirit in the space that had been filled by the news. I’m praying now for guidance about this year.

I invite you to join our entire community as we prepare ourselves to meet Christ in His fullness at Easter. Each year we use Father Keating’s book, *Journey to the Center, a Lenten Passage*, as our community reading. It offers us a day-by-day, insightful and inspiring guide to personal participation in these high holy days of the Christian liturgical year.

Together we are discovering ever new depths and meaning in the experiential Christianity we only thought we knew. 🙏

LENT: A TIME OF PREPARATION

by Barbara Cook

When Christ was born as Jesus, God became incarnate, as a man, so that all men, through Christ, may become God. Through His passion, death, direction and Ascension, Christ revealed the way we are to follow to become God. His resurrected presence within us leads us in the way of self-giving for the love of God and our fellow man. Christ's way of being human is not the world's way of making ourselves more, but instead giving up more of ourselves to make more room for God. And since God is an equal opportunity Redeemer we are all qualified to participate in His resurrected glory.

When we were baptized we were all fully endowed with everything we needed to die to the old man, the false self, and to rise into the new life of Christ. Each of us received the seven gifts of the Spirit: reverence, fortitude, piety, counsel, knowledge, understanding and wisdom. These gifts begin to be activated as soon as we consent to God's offer and began the spiritual journey. They support and sustain us as we participate in the death of the false self, the sense of self that feels separate from God and keeps

us from true intimacy with others.

We die to ourselves daily during our two periods of Centering Prayer. This dying is a letting go of our usual preoccupations and it creates space that activates God's spiritual gifts in our lives. The process is speeded up and supported by sustained periods of silence that we share on retreats. Fr. Thomas Keating suggests that each of us is well served by at least 10 days of retreat each year. Each time we enter the silence we are dying and being born with Christ while we pray. Retreats have had a profound effect on me; deepening my self-knowledge which brings humility, healing and intimacy with God.

Lent is a time of preparation for our own participation in this dying and rebirth that characterizes our life in Christ and our union with God. It's a time to give something of ourselves away for a while to make more space for Christ. God's Holy Spirit is an unerring guide in helping us decide what to release for Lent. My personal experience may offer a helpful example. For many years, no matter what else I did for Lent, I did a 10 day fast. I gained many insights and clarity of

mind and I also got to see that I had mixed motives regarding control, weight and pride in the successful accomplishment of the fast. It was several years before I could actually get still enough during the fast to pray more and to be more open to the presence of God. One year as I was preparing to begin my fast, the still small inner voice guided me not to fast. I was led to forgo my fast that year and instead to feed my child of God self consciously and healthily with sacred intention. My inner guidance was at variance with my personal plans and programs, but as I followed it I became more awake each day as I made more room for God through my Lenten act of self giving.

Lent offers us an opportunity to join with Christ as participants in the Paschal mystery and that participation accelerates our spiritual journey. We may inquire of ourselves, "What can I do for 40 days that I may not want to do forever? What would open up more space in me for God?" Whatever response comes to mind must be kept personal between God and ourselves. It is not to be talked about in a social way because then

GUIDELINES FOR CHRISTIAN LIFE, GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION

Fr. Thomas Keating, in his seminal work
Open Mind, Open Heart,
lists 42 principles underlying the Christian spiritual journey.
Fr. Keating asks that these principles be read according
to the method of Lectio Divina.
One principle will appear in these pages each month.

19TH GUIDELINE



The building of our *new self* is bound to be marked
by innumerable mistakes and sometimes by sin.
Such failures, however serious, are insignificant
compared to the inviolable goodness of our true Self.
We should ask God's pardon, seek forgiveness
from those we may have offended,
and then act with renewed confidence and energy
as if nothing had happened.

it stops being prayer. Each of us will
want to hold our Lenten intention
privately sacred, acting and looking
to others as if we were not doing
anything special.

We could also use the heightened
attention around Lent to make more
time for God not only in prayer but
also in reading, Bible study and
reflection on the goodness of God

in our lives. Whatever we do will
be strengthened and empowered
by the fact that our efforts are
being done in partnership with
the whole CCH community and
the worldwide community of
Centering Prayer. We are pilgrims
on the great journey into the heart
of the beloved, not just for ourselves,
but for all of God's world. ☉

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LENTEN READING SUGGESTIONS



Journey To The Center
by Thomas Keating



A Living Lent
A contemplative daily companion
for lent and holy week
by Peter Traben Haas



Keep a True Lent
by Charles Fillmore

READING SUGGESTIONS WITH THE MONTHLY AIM

The Problem of Pain
by C. S. Lewis

Meetings at the Edge
by Stephen Levine

Our Greatest Gift
by Henri Nouwen

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Sunday 9:30-10 am & 11:30 am-noon

SEEDS

Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth
plants something in his soul.

For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds,
so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality
that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most
of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost,
because men are not prepared to receive them:
for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere
except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.

... In all the situations of life
the "will of God" comes to us not merely
as an external dictate of impersonal law
but above all as an interior invitation of personal love.
Too often the conventional conception of "God's will"
as a sphinx-like and arbitrary force bearing down upon us
with implacable hostility, leads men to lose faith in a God
they cannot find it possible to love.

Such a view of the divine will drives human weakness to despair and
one wonders if it is not, itself, often the expression of a despair
too intolerable to be admitted to conscious consideration.
These arbitrary "dictates" of a domineering and insensible Father
are more often seeds of hatred than of love.

If that is our concept of the will of God,
we cannot possibly seek the obscure and intimate mystery
of the encounter that takes place in contemplation.

We will desire only to fly as far as possible from Him
and hide from His Face forever.

So much depends on our idea of God!

Yet no idea of Him, however pure and perfect,
is adequate to express Him as He really is.

Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about Him.

Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pages 14-15.



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ANNUAL AIM: BLESSED

Come, O you blessed of my Father! Matthew 25:34

Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.

THE COMFORT THAT COMES FROM MOURNING

by Mikail Davenport

They that mourn or bear sorrow
neither strive
after a pain-free existence
nor turn away from pain,
but bear it with acceptance.
For the fullness of existence,
life's true richness,
does not consist solely
in health and happiness
but in an ever-expanding
range of joy and sorrow;
and the broader the range,
the richer life becomes.
... And this richness,
this extended range
in the capacity for joy and sorrow,
reaching upward to the divine,
is precisely blessedness.

Valentin Tomberg,
Lazarus, Come Forth!

As we persist in our self-observation
we will suffer more – mourn.
We will have to continue to pay
over and over for the gifts
we have been given
and the even greater gifts
we wish to receive.

Robert H. Pish,
*The Path of the Beatitudes,
A New Beginning*

*I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you,
taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts.*

Ezekiel 36:26

There is an old Hebrew proverb from the Mishnah that says, “In every blessing there is a curse and in every curse there is a blessing.” My first blessing was getting polio at age two; the curse was the pain and suffering produced by the virus’ effects on my body and the physical therapy demanded for recovery. Throughout my early childhood, pain and suffering became so much a part of my life it became part of me, part of who I was, and eventually who I would become. It was not until my spiritual awakening at 32 that it dawned on me what transformation suffering can and does produce. That type of transformation involved quite significant mourning that led to a

distinct sense of comfort when I was able to accept what my limits were. That comforting further evolved into what I consider my life’s philosophy: “The only limits I possess are those that I impose upon myself or allow others to impose upon me.”

When one is in pain, one either deals with it or not. There is no middle ground. In dealing with it, you either accept or reject; there can be no denial. It is in your face! I found over the years that acceptance leads to the “comforting” Christ talked about in this Beatitude. Rejection breeds more suffering. This applies to every type of mourning we encounter; those losses that at the time seem so significant and costly,

where we are so caught up in the mourning, we cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. The light is there; we just cannot see it until we accept the loss as a part of life, a tax we have to pay for having a physical/emotional body.

As I began to go through the acceptance of my suffering, I found comfort in exercising compassion and understanding, seeing others in their pain and being able to feel for them in an empathetic fashion, not sympathetic. Sympathy comes from the animal nature of our being (poor, pitiful you; I am so sorry for your suffering); empathy comes from the Divine nature of our being (I am able to walk in your shoes and see your troubles through your eyes and understand them). That upwelling of compassion and understanding opened the door of perception that led me to the Sufi path and to prison ministry.

Imagine your life so rigidly controlled by others that the only time you have to yourself is when you are sleeping. That is exactly what being a polio patient is like, being in prison, in a body that doesn't work like other kids. I remember my mother saying to me one day, "Although you'll never be like other boys, that doesn't mean that you can't become something better." All I heard was the first

part "never be like other boys." For years that haunted me and kept me small and fearful, lost in drugs and alcohol, seeking temporary relief in hedonistic pleasures, until the day I awoke to the compassion that is always ours in God, by whatever name or form you worship Him/Her/It. Imagine being in the prison of the whining mind and then being freed into the Grace of God and Its Work in you! What joy, what transformation! The saying I use now when I find myself falling back into fear or the "poor me" is this: "The Will of God will never take you where the Grace of God cannot protect you." It is not rocket science; it's discernment and awareness.

My second blessing was finding my beloved late wife Kate, a unique relationship that lasted 24 years. When I was stumbling along trying to find my "right" spiritual path, she became a guiding light forward. When I found the Church of Conscious Harmony and turned her on to it, she leapt into the teachings and never left. I lost her, in a manner of speaking, to the Church; the curse within that blessing. Once I realized what Grace her deep involvement with the Church had created, a plethora of blessings for not only me, but for so many others, I once again had

that realization of that previous saying. What appears as the curse transforms itself into the blessing... always. It is so easy to find the negative, painful, hurtful things in every experience. It is so difficult to be open to the Grace. Yet, in that acceptance of Grace we bloom; we become blessed and comforted, just as Christ said.

As a spiritual director in the Chishti Sufi path, I have had a number of students over the years, most of whom came to the path while actively dying. The curse was to see such beautiful souls in unimaginable fear and suffering; the blessing was to watch how God's Grace, once consciously accepted, transformed their suffering into such beautiful peace before the end. Those experiences buoyed me above the tempestuous seas of grief when my beloved Kate made her transition. The Grace of God gave me the Will to see this excruciating situation as one of bringing her to His/Her/Its bosom, something for which she always yearned, not for relief of suffering, but for being with her beloved Christ. When the darkness of death overcame her, the Light of God surrounded her and lifted her up; she became radiant. What more can be asked for someone whom one loves so deeply?

SUFFER IN THE RIGHT WAY IS GOOD

Becoming older, my body brings me new transformational opportunities daily. I am constantly amazed at the levels of grace that flow over me. Each new situation opens doors of perception that I, being humanly resistant to change, would rather not experience. Yet, the Grace flows, lifting me above the fray and reminding me of God's unconditional, unfathomable, ever-present Love. Such a gift!

In closing, remember that I know nothing; all I have to share is my experiences of the Grace that allows me to see what is real and what is illusory! In the words of Hazrat Inayat Khan,

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.’ All things are given to those who ask, and they only deserve them, and they only can enjoy them. The infant cries when she is hungry and to her the food is given, and it is then that she enjoys it most. So it is with the lovers of God, with the seekers of Truth; when their desire becomes so deep that it makes them mourn, it is then that they are comforted.” ☞

~*The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan, The Unity of Religious Ideals, Jesus, The Beatitudes*

There is some inner mathematics of cause and effect which invisibly rules men's lives; and no real suffering is wasted. Only imaginary suffering is pure waste, leading nowhere. Real suffering is payment—for what. God knows, because we cannot remember what we owe—but payment of something which, sooner or later, must be paid. Only not to suffer more than is necessary, this is the thing. For to suffer mechanically, to begin to suffer by habit, is to start the whole chain again. If one can avoid that, then sooner or later the hard time must pass, and all kinds of new possibilities appear, which one may then at last—through hardship—be able to use.

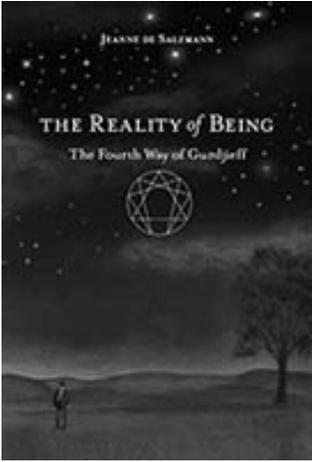
Someone passes through your life and leaves an image that you cannot forget, nor find comfort from. But did you not leave such a trace in some other person's life, without caring or even knowing? Did I not, did not everyone? Everything must work itself out. All debts must be paid. All that one has inflicted one has to suffer, before one can become free. So those who wish for freedom can only say: Let what comes come; I will accept it.

It is not because I myself have

any right to do so that I say this, but because I was shown that it is so. In Ouspensky's last months one saw how he accepted being old, sick, ugly, helpless, in pain, misunderstood, and indeed did everything to prevent others comforting him, to suffer consciously, to make it more difficult for him to be understood. For to be understood is what all men crave more than food, comfort, even life. And to sacrifice being understood by ordinary men in an ordinary way is both to become free, and to make possible a completely different understanding for those who desire it. From this utter acceptance of what had to come, from the endeavour to pay *more*, to suffer *willingly*, and to pay *in advance* of fate presenting the bill, Ouspensky became another man—and partly one saw how it was done.

So that while for ordinary people one can only wish to alleviate suffering as much as possible, to those who have become connected with this way of escape, one can only say: ‘If you can suffer in the right way, it is good. If you can't, it doesn't matter.’ ☞

Rodney Collin, *The Theory of Conscious Harmony*, pages 169-170.



THE WORK

OF INNER CHRISTIANITY

My Father is still working, and I also am working. John 5:17

MY TRUE NATURE IS CONSCIOUSNESS

I have an irresistible wish to be myself, free of all that weighs me down, all that makes me dependent. I wish the happiness of being entirely myself, without any reservation. I feel it is not to be sought outside myself, in someone or in something else. The only source of happiness is the fact of *being*, without expecting any profit or reward, just the revelation of *what is*. I love *what is*.

I hold myself here trying to see my barriers—my tensions, my thoughts—so that, in this seeing, they can fall by themselves. I do not judge them or wish to substitute something better. I become sensitive to something they hide toward which I am drawn, as by a magnet. It is as though I pass beyond... my body disappears... I feel that I am no longer a compact mass but an infinity of living particles in movement, in vibration. I feel myself as participating in a Being

whose force gives me life, which I then radiate around me. It is like a kind of cosmic breathing in which I take part.

I must never forget what gives life to the form. The form alone does not exist. That which “is” in the form, that which has taken form, is the essence of what is questioning in me. I seek therefore to return to the source. The more the “I” seeks to know itself, the more it participates in consciousness and the less in the body in which it is submerged. All thinking comes from the thought “I.” But from where does the thought “I” come? When we look within and return to the source, the thought “I” disappears. And when it disappears, the feeling “I am” appears by itself. Then we attain consciousness, our true nature. When we know our true “I,” something emerges from the depths of being and takes over. It is behind the mind. It is infinite,

divine, eternal. We call it the soul.

There is no death. Life cannot die. The coating is used up, the form disintegrates. Death is an end—the end of everything known. It is a fearful thing because we cling to the known. But life *is*. It is always here, even if for us it is the unknown. We can know life only after we know death. We must die to the known and enter the unknown. We need to die voluntarily. We have to free ourselves from the known. Once free, we can enter the unknown, the void, the complete stillness, where there is no deterioration—the only state in which we can find out what life is and what love is.

Which is real: what I am conscious of, or consciousness itself? Deep down in my being I *am* already what I seek. This is the impetus of my whole search. When consciousness is here, I realize that consciousness is me. I and all that surrounds me are

OUR SUFFERING SHOULD ALWAYS REMAIN CALM

... Try to rise above suffering.

It is a state of soul which springs from the best that is in us.

It comes from a desire to belong more and more wholly to God,
and to fuse our very life with His.

This desire is excellent, and we should grieve
when we see it being realized so slowly and imperfectly.

Our suffering, however, should always remain calm, and
ever turned towards the tranquillizing rays of a joy superior to it. The
suffering is due to our fallen state,

whereas the joy comes from the goodness of God.

Now God is good infinitely more than we are bad.

The joy is the term and end for which we were made;

suffering is merely one aspect of the way.

*My peace I give unto you ... These things I have spoken to you,
that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be filled.*

You know what the words *These things I have spoken to you* mean.

Jesus had just said:

As the Father hath loved me,

I also have loved you. Abide in my love.

He says the same to us, and we respond to that love
by desire and suffering.

And suffering is an admirable response—the best, I think.

Try, then, to unite yourself with the supreme suffering
whereby we were redeemed.

A Carthusian, *They Speak by Silences*, page 39.

the same consciousness. My true nature is consciousness. The search for myself becomes the quest for the Self, more and more profound. The Creator appears as the “I,” the “Self.” Whether it is manifest or nonmanifest is immaterial when one remains turned toward it. There is no object to know. The

Self is always the Self, and *to know* the Self is *to be* the Self. When the true nature is known, there is Being without beginning or end—immortal consciousness. 

Jeanne de Salzmann, *The Reality of Being – The Fourth Way of Gurdjieff*, pages 174-176. For more information and experience with these teachings, you are invited to attend the *Work of Inner Christianity* class held Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at The Church of Conscious Harmony.

FEBRUARY CALENDAR

Visit consciousharmony.org
for a complete listing of events

SPECIAL EVENTS

Community Workday
Feb 6 9 am-12 noon

One Day Centering Prayer
Feb 13 8:30 am-4:30 pm
\$15 Bring a potluck dish to share.

2-day Commuter Retreat
Feb 14 8-5:30 & Feb 15 7-4:30
\$100 Register with the office.

Fr. William Meninger
Feb 22-23 7:30-9 pm
2-part talk Register w/office \$25

MONTHLY

1st Sundays
Bring non-perishables for Caritas

Gurdjieff Music
Feb 9 7:30-8:30 pm

WEEKLY

Sundays
Lectio Divina 8-9 am
Worship Service 10-11:30 am
Youth Program 10-11:30 am
Fellowship 11:30 am

Wednesdays
Prayer Circle 10:15-10:45 am
Contemplative Lunch noon-1 pm
Contemplative Communion Service 6-7 pm

Thursdays 7:30-9 pm
Work of Inner Christianity Class

Fridays 7:30-8:45 pm
Devotional Service

DAILY

Mondays-Fridays 7-7:35 am
Centering Prayer Service in Theosis Chapel

Recordings of services are available
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*Believe
in the light,
that you may become
sons of light.*

JOHN 12:36

LENT

The Liturgy is the celebration of theological realities ... in an organized way using the main events in the life of Christ as the point of departure and dividing up the immense intensity of a single moment of divine union into parts, like you unpack your trunk upon arriving at your destination. The liturgical year is the unpacking of the lightning flash of the immense divine life that begins the liturgical cycle as a kind of course ... a course in ascetical practice.

It's a course in very profound theology.

It's also a course in the celebration of those ideas and Christian mysticism. Each of us plugs into it at the particular level of your own assimilation of this light, or the light's assimilation of you.

Thomas Keating, Excerpt from a talk at The Church of Conscious Harmony,
December 2007