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# The Trials of Job: A Physician's Meditation

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*How wonderful were your scriptures! How profound! We see their surface and it attracts us like children. And yet, O God, their depth is stupendous. We shudder to peer into them, for they inspire in us both the awe of reverence and the thrill of love.*

*St. Augustine, The Confessions*

## I. Introduction: Job, the Paradigm of Suffering

Literary masterworks survive, not because they resolve some universal human dilemma, but precisely because they do not. Their special appeal lies in the fact that they confront the mystery of human existence; they do so in exalted language that evokes the tremendum of religious experience and they offer multiple levels of interpretation and meaning. They leave the fundamental questions tantalizingly unanswered, but also tantalizingly alive for every era to ponder. All lasting works center on the question of man to which, as Karl Rahner has said, ". . . there is no answer," Job is preeminently such a book.

Job confronts the enigma of human suffering directly, poignantly and in sublime poetic language. It leaves us deeply disquieted, but never indifferent. Job has been read in a multitude of ways: as a paradigm of patience; a test of righteousness; a proof that good may come from evil; an evidence of the meaninglessness of human existence; a proof of God's indifference, or His moral ambivalence. Some conclude that the answer to Job's question is abandonment to God's will; others, the rejection of God as a cosmic sadist; and others that human, not divine, love is the only reality upon which we can rely. Whatever the interpretation, all ages have recognized that the Book of Job describes an inescapable human experience, one that each of us ultimately must confront and to which we

must fashion a personal response.

Paul Claudel, the French poet-diplomat, after 50 years of struggling with the meaning of the Book of Job, concluded that, "it is the most sublime, the most poignant, the most daring, and at the same time the most disappointing . . . and the most offensive of the books of the Bible." As an enigma, its closest competitor is that other strangely fascinating piece of Wisdom literature, the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Even a partial list of the luminaries who, like Claudel, puzzled over Job's intriguing text, is overwhelming in length and intellectual power. Among the *saints* we find Jerome, Chrysostom and Gregory, the latter devoting four entire books of meditation to Job's dilemma. Among the *theologians* we can count Luther, Kierkegaard, Buber, Danielou, and Calvin. The latter was moved to devote 159 sermons to Job. The *philosophers* include Maimonides, Spinoza, Hobbes, Kant, Nietzsche, Royce, Paul Weiss, and Walter Kaufman. The *writers* include Lamartine, Voltaire, D. H. Lawrence, and Robert Frost. Archibald MacLeish cast Job as a modern businessman. William Blake illustrated the Book of Job with his mystical engravings.

If to this partial list, we add all those who have wrestled with the theme of human suffering and its meaning, we would embrace much of the world's great literature — from the folk tales of Ancient Egypt and the Middle East, through Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, to Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe to Dostoyevski, De Unamuno, Camus, Kafka, John Gardner and Samuel Beckett. No serious writer or thinker has been able to ignore Job's anguish, his questions and his desperate need for answers. Can we believe in God with the mysteries of evil and justice unanswered? Does suffering have meaning? Does meaning itself exist? All art ultimately must touch these questions, or remain forever ephemeral and on the surface of life.

What can a physician add to what has already been so copiously and perceptively written about Job? I am neither an exegete, biblical scholar, philosopher, theologian, or literary critic. I cannot discourse on the metaphysical compatibility of evil with the existence of a good and just God. Nor can I add anything to the learned debates about the provenance, authorship, chronology, unity, linguistics, or poetic merits of the text.

My own fascination with the text of Job is as a paradigm of human suffering — physical and spiritual. As such, it speaks to the physician who meets Job daily in the suffering of his patients. He is under a moral imperative to comprehend that experience as best he can. Without that comprehension the physician cannot fully help or heal. Without it, he cannot prepare for the inevitable experience of his own suffering.

What I can offer is one physician's meditation on Job, on what the text reveals of the nature of suffering, its impact on the human spirit, and the things we must understand to help each other in the presence of illness and misfortune. I shall concentrate on the human experience of Job, his friends' efforts to console him, and the insights we can gain from Job's

dialogues with his friends. I will comment on what this rich text reveals to doctors, nurses, patients, and pastoral counselors, and all of us. Job is a text we must study if we are to be healers rather than wounders of the sick and the afflicted.

I know even these aims are not modest. But, at least, I hope to avoid the intellectual and spiritual arrogance of another physician who commented on Job's text. In his *Answer to Job*, the physician-psychologist, Carl Jung, humbly promised to meditate on the text "... as a layman, and a physician who had been privileged to see deeply into the psychic depth of many people." Instead of keeping that promise, however, Jung had the audacity to put God on the analytic couch. He found God entrapped in a Manichean emotional conflict, caught between His good and evil natures. God, according to Jung, was guilt-ridden because He violated the Covenant in His treatment of Job. Jung even pictured God as envying Job and projecting His own guilt on him. The Incarnation, on this view, is God's way of reparation for the injustice done Job. On the way to this bizarre conclusion, Jung also psychoanalyzed Christ, Ezekiel, and St. John and reinterpreted the doctrine of the Assumption! Jung achieved a level of hubris unparalleled even in a profession not particularly noted for its humility! While I may not, by the nature of my task, avoid pretentiousness entirely, I think I can avoid Jung's own Super-Jehovah complex.

## II. Outline of the Book

The line of Job's story is of the utmost simplicity. It has what Northrop Frye has called a "U" shape. Job starts out prosperous; he is smitten by calamities; Job is restored to his former status. Within that simple line lies one of the most profound metaphysical and spiritual odysseys in all of literature.

The story of Job was originally probably limited to Chapters 1, 2, and 42, what are now the prologue and epilogue. The intervening poetic portion is a later addition to the "story."

The Book of Job opens in heaven where we learn that Job, a prosperous and righteous desert chieftain in the land of Uz, is beloved by God for his piety and faithfulness. Satan is scandalized by such a paragon of virtue and challenges God's trust in Job. Job's piety, Satan says, is nothing but well disguised self-interest. Satan taunts God, "Just reach out and strike what he has, and he will curse you to your face." (1:11)\* God is so confident of Job's righteousness that he turns Job over to Satan's power, at first exempting only Job's person from harm.

Job is visited by a series of calamities. He loses all his flocks. His home is destroyed and all his children killed. Yet, Job remains faithful. "Yahweh gave, and Yahweh took away. Blessed be Yahweh's name." (1:21) But Satan is still not satisfied. He challenges God further, "reach out and strike

\*All quotations from the *Anchor Bible*, translated by Marvin Pope (see references).

him. Touch his bone and flesh and he will curse you to your face" (2:5). God, still confident of Job's righteousness, hands him over to Satan's power "only spare his life," (2:6) He says to Satan. Job is now afflicted with a terrible skin disease and reduce to a pitiful state, seated on an ash heap, scraping himself with a potsherd. So dismal is his predicament that Job's wife tells him to curse God and die. Job refuses, saying, "Shall we accept good from God and not accept evil?" (2:10)

At this point the story changes from prose to the most powerful kind of poetry. Job is visited by three friends. At first, when they see the state to which he has fallen, they grieve silently with him for seven days and nights. Job then delivers a soliloquy lamenting his fate, cursing the day of his birth and yearning for death to release him from his sufferings.

His three friends can no longer contain their silence. Each delivers several cycles of speeches to which Job replies. Each speaker sets forth, in various ways, the traditional teaching that evil is the wages of sin. They imply at first indirectly, and then by direct accusation, that Job or his children have sinned in some way or they would not be punished by a just and good God. Job vehemently denies their accusations and vigorously protests his friends' rationalizations. He refuses to confess to transgressions he has not committed. Job challenges God's righteousness. He prays fervently for someone to hear his case — some neutral judge — whom he can confront face-to-face. If only he could present his case, the injustice of his sufferings would be clear.

Job's debate with his friends ends in stalemate and Job soliloquizes again, protesting his innocence. He recites the code of righteous behavior by which he has lived his whole life. He pleads again for God to answer him. Now a new counselor, named Elihu, enters the debate. He is a young and arrogant man who castigates Job's three friends for their ineffectiveness in arguing with Job. He launches into his own long tirade against Job's protestations of innocence — using the same arguments as the others, but more vehemently and more accusingly.

Finally, God does speak directly to Job, out of a whirlwind. He does not answer Job in Job's terms. Instead, in magnificent verse, He hurls a series of ironic questions at Job. God questions Job's fitness to understand even the simplest mysteries of His creation. Yet these, wondrous as they are, are far from exhausting God's power. Job is mistaken to think that God or the moral order of His universe, can be understood in human terms or measured by man. God challenges Job, "will the contender with Shaddai yield? He who reproves God, let him answer for it." (40:2).

Job is overwhelmed. He has had the confrontation he begged for, but not as he could possibly have imagined. Job admits he is of small account, "Lo I am small, how can I answer you?" (40:4), and resolves to speak no more. But the Lord continues His challenges. Would Job dare to condemn God, that he might justify himself? (40:8) God continues His rhapsody on the mysteries of the cosmos which man cannot understand, including the existence of evil. At no point does the Lord use any of the conventional

explanations so laboriously and confidently argued by Job's friends.

Job has now had his wish. He has seen the Almighty with his own eyes. He abases himself before God and repents for the folly of daring to be God's critic. He no longer asks for reason, but for compassion: "I had heard of you by hearsay, but now my eyes have seen you. So, I recant and repent in dust and ashes." (42:5-6) The book ends in a prose epilogue in which God chastises Eliphaz, one of Job's friends: "My anger burns against you and your two friends for you have not spoken the truth of me as Job did." (42:7-8)

Job's friends must offer sacrifice, but they will not be forgiven unless Job prays for them. Job's prosperity is restored several-fold; his honor is regained, he lives a long life, and dies in peace.

### III. The Odyssey of Job's Suffering

In his preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley warns about the non-transposability of prose and poetry and his abhorrence for didacticism in poetry. All attempts to extract explicit meanings or morals from poetry as exalted as Job's run the risk of puerility. It is what Job's poetry evokes in each of us about the human experience of suffering that draws us irresistibly. We can see Job in ourselves, our families, friends, and our patients. In Job's dialogue with his friends, we recognize our own attempts to help and to give some rational grounding to suffering. We feel Job's anger, protestations, and puzzlement, his sense of injustice and alienation. Everywhere they greet us: in every hospital, home for the aged and retarded, in the hospices, the prisons, in the victims of the holocaust, and in every oppressed land. The sheer massiveness of human misery and the inevitability that we, too, will suffer, hover silently over even the most prosperous of us.

The physician sees all of this up close in the inhabitants of that city of suffering — the hospital he traverses daily. He sees how illness shocks, shatters, and estranges. He cannot help being pulled into the sufferer's experience if he is truly a healer and not simply a tinker of diseased organs and disabled bodies. To be sure, the physician must practice detachment — but he must practice a compassionate detachment. He must have a capacity to step back from Job's ills and anguish, to diagnose them accurately so as to treat them rationally. But, if he is also to help, he must confront, with his patients, the deeper anguish that transcends the pain and the physical ravages of the disease.

Illness and sickness create the deepest suffering and the most severe test of life's meaning. Recall that neither God nor Satan regarded Job as fully tested until his "flesh and bone" were touched. Job suffered the loss of all he cherished. While Job lamented his losses loudly and pitifully, he sank into the deepest depths of his despair and resentment only when God permitted Satan to afflict him with a frightful skin disease. It is after this that Job began to hurl his sharpest blasphemies, questions, accusations,

and bitterness at God.

Once personal illness is added to Job's other burdens, he is like the Psalmist "on the brink of Sheol," "a man bereft of strength." (Psalm 88)\* He oscillates between abjectly begging for the death and pleading for restoration of his health. He accuses the very God from Whom he demands justice. Over and over again, Job asks, as does every afflicted human, Why? Why me? Why now? Why not all the unrighteous who prosper and live long lives? "What have I done to you, man watcher? Why have you made me your target? Why am I a burden to you?" (7:20) But Job gets no answer, even after he confronts God eye-to-eye. The mystery of suffering must remain a mystery; it is beyond human rationality. Job learns that no human has a claim on God. No human can presume to be a critic of the cosmic order. Job is finally overwhelmed and reconciled, not by a reasonable explanation, but by a religious experience. He is struck by awe and fear of the Lord and painfully learns the lesson of the psalmist of Psalm 111, or in Job's own words: "Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom. To turn from evil is understanding." (28:28)

For the physician, Job is the incarnation of his own patient with whom the physician goes through the experience of suffering. Illness is a special assault on the whole person — as much on the spirit as on the body. Suffering is more than physiological pain. Pain and painless disease, alike, beget anguish because they contract the possibilities of human existence. The horizons of what may be hoped for are fore-shortened. The afflicted is, in Job's words, one ". . . whose way is hidden, whom God has fenced about." (3:23) Sickness is the unfailing evidence of our ultimate and ineradicable finitude — the sign of the fragility of personal existence. It exposes unequivocally the vulnerability, dependence, expendability, and exploitability always lurking just beneath the surface of human life. It terrifies the one who is ill, and those who attend him or are dear to him.

The one who is sick can no longer define and pursue his own goals. The purposes of his life are predetermined by the disease. It takes center-stage. Sickness make the body and the mind the enemy of the self; it obtunds all plans. It forces a confrontation with the numinous: "Why do you rear man at all? Or pay any mind to him? Inspect him every morning? Test him every moment?" (7:17-18) How shall I respond, what shall I say, how shall I live? The answers must be our own if we are to remain persons. Men and women can endure extreme pain and suffering when there is hope, or explanation. Without these, the suffering person faces the terrible possibility of a dissolution of his entire being.

Suffering demands that endurance and dying be personal enterprises. It unmercifully exposes our freedom to fashion a personal response. In that freedom lies the paradoxical possibility of healing even the dying patient. Unlike Job, we must respond without seeing God eye-to-eye, without directly confronting His ineffability. To embrace or reject suffering, to

\*Text of the Jerusalem Bible

make it our own experience and not become its passive object, is the final test of that autonomy we hold so dear when we are healthy.

### Wide Range of Responses

Physicians, families, and friends must be prepared for a wide, unpredictable and often shocking range of responses to Job's questions posed by the sick person they love, and think they know. Is suffering a punishment for sin, or is it a preventive? Is it a means of atonement and reconciliation? Or is it, as the Stoics said, an inexorable, inexplicable law of nature, useless to resist? Is suffering evidence, as some Existentialists would have it, of God's indifference or the meaninglessness of meaning itself? Is it the way of salvation as Christ taught? Or is it, as Nietzsche insisted, that the whole idea of salvation itself is the result of the Christian's "inability to let suffering be senseless." Is the sufferer, like Kafka's protagonist, accused of an unspecified crime by an accuser he will never meet? Is he, like Oedipus, suffering because of a curse on his family, or like Prometheus, for opposing God's will, like Lear or MacBeth, for a defect of character, or like Jason and Medea, for an excess of hubris?

The whole complex, contradictory and vacillating nexus of rationalizations of suffering is incarnated in each sick and suffering human. And it is into this tangled nexus that the physician and others must enter. In the modern world, suffering is not very often accepted, simply and submissively, as God's will, as Job first accepted it. Rather, modern man resists openly the affront to pride and self-esteem, which misfortune, disease, and death represent. Job, himself was not entirely the model of steadfast faith and patience which St. James makes him out to be. (5:11)

Job's text teaches us how to discern the many ways in which humans react to suffering. We must comprehend the range of those responses if we are to help, and not exacerbate the suffering. Despite Shelley's abhorrence for the didactic, we must yet look at the more mundane practical lessons Job's human predicament can teach all of us.

We note, for example, that Job's friends spent a week with him in silence. Considering their later clumsy attempts to console him, this was perhaps the best thing they did. Their presence was a genuine act of empathy. It is the first step we, too, must take — to *be* with the sick, to listen to their soliloquies, to say just enough to show we are there, and to allow their hurt to show itself. A receptive silence, one that communicates compassionate concern without pitying, allows the patient to vent his resentment and anger to another person.

But, like Job, the patient is, in reality, speaking to God. There is, in us, a deep impulse to vent our sufferings. We who attend the sick are privileged witnesses to those struggles. The sick person sooner or later knows there may be no answer to his questions. What he needs is our understanding that the struggle is a personal, deeply spiritual and perilous one. Often we help most if we help least — if we listen in silence, as Job's friends did at first.



Like them, we cannot remain forever silent. Inevitably we must enter the experiences of illness and suffering in *this* person. But we must do so without shock, surprise, or moralizing. We must not allow our sensibilities to be offended by what we hear in the patient's soliloquy. Above all, we must avoid trying to win an argument: "But what does your arguing prove?" (6:25) Like Job's counselors, in our zeal for explanation we run the risk of becoming not friends, but accusers, usurping God's prerogatives of judgment.

We cannot rightfully expect that God will speak directly to us as He did to Job. Yet we must not forget that Job himself, even before he had his confrontation with God, knew that he could not win his case against God. "But how can man be acquitted before God? If He deigned to litigate with him, could he answer Him one in a thousand?" (9:2-3) "He is not like me, a man I could challenge, 'Let us go to court together.' " (9:32) The inescapable fact is that Job cannot argue his case against God nor can Job's friends presume to argue God's case against Job.

Most offensive to Job, and to any suffering or sick person, are condescension and presumption. Let us listen to Job's own words to his friends:

I know as much as you know  
I am not inferior to you  
Rather would I speak with Shaddai  
I wish to remonstrate with God  
But you are daubers of deceit,  
Quack healers all of you  
I wish you would keep strictly silent  
That would be wisdom in you. (13:2-5)

We need to appreciate, too, that the experience of illness is not penetrable by others and none of us can know how we will respond. Thus, Job says to his friends:

Will it be well when he probes you?  
Can you trick him as men are tricked? (13:9)

Will not his fear overwhelm you? (13:11)

Your maxims are ashen aphorisms  
Defenses of clay your defenses.  
Be silent before me that I may speak. (13:12-13)

God Himself agreed with Job and castigated Job's friends just as severely for not speaking truly. He preferred Job's honest protestations to the pious hypocrisy of his friends who dared to argue God's case against Job. If we are to avoid the same condemnation, we must listen carefully to Job's words when we are in the presence of our suffering patients, families, or friends.

Job, like his counterparts in every age, asks repeatedly for our compassionate listening, not moralizing speeches:

Pity me, Pity me, Oh my friends.  
For the hand of God has struck me.  
Why do you pursue me like God? (19:21-22)

Hear my word attentively,  
Let this be the solace you give.  
Bear with me, let me speak,  
When I have spoken, mock on. (21:2-3)

Over and over again, Job beseeches his friends to hear him out, to understand his plight, to feel compassion for his predicament, but not to preach to him.

In some of the most forceful words in all literature, Job speaks for all the suffering in all the ages. We are all tempted to play the roles of Bildad, Zophar and Eliphaz, and some of us, even, the more arrogant role of Elihu. Job is blunt in his condemnation of their theologizing. He speaks eloquently for all those patient sufferers who, out of deference, do not tell us to "shut up" as Job so forthrightly told his friends.

We must be prepared, therefore, if we would help, to hear outpourings of rage, doubt, uncertainty, despair, hope and numbness all intermingled. They will come from believers and non-believers alike. So estimable a Christian as C. S. Lewis, in the depth of his own grief at the loss of his wife, went so far as to say:

The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all' but 'so this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.' How often had bitter resentment been stifled through sheer terror, and an act of love — in every sense an act — put on to hide the operation? (Lewis went even further:) Is it rational to believe in a bad God? Any way in a God so bad as all that? The cosmic sadist?

We are shocked by such language, coming as it does from a committed Christian. Remember that C. S. Lewis, before his own grief, wrote one of the most coherent and rational treatises on the metaphysical and theological problem of evil. Even so fine an intellect could be crushed by the actual presence of suffering.

But Lewis's odyssey, like Job's, finally led him to reconciliation: "and so, with God, I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face?" We who would help must be humble before such anguished cries. We must stay with the sufferer as he descends the limb of his despair and his hurt. We must hope, and pray, and listen, as he struggles to reascend the other limb of the same "U" that Job traversed. We presume too much if we think our logic can give meaning to suffering before the sick man, like Job, has met God in the crucible of his suffering. Meaning does not come from syllogisms.

We must remember again and again, that God chastised Job's friends for their pietistic formulae. God suffered Job's sharp rebukes. God alone understood the full depths of Job's anguish. We cannot forget that Christ Himself in those last moments of His own anguish, uttered those forever

chilling words:

When the sixth hour came, there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour; and at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me?' (Mark 15:35)

Even Christ, Who knew the Father and His purposes, felt the human experience of abandonment in His darkest hour of suffering.

Job reminds us, too, that we cannot fully comprehend another's suffering. We cannot hope to understand why *this* person responds *this* way. It is too easy when we are well to preach and criticize:

I have heard plenty of this;  
Galling comforters are you all  
Have windy words no limit?  
What moves you to prattle on?  
I, too, could talk like you,  
If you were in my place.  
I could harangue you with words,  
Could shake my head at you. (16:2-4)

Pierre Wolff, in an arresting but profound little book entitled, *May I Hate God?*, probes the depths of feelings we may expect from those who suffer. He warns that hatred can overcome reason but that hate is itself a sign of residual love. We cannot hate that to which we are indifferent. Job's friends accuse him of blasphemy. But as Wolff points out, behind Job's seeming blasphemy there was more love than in the sterile, hypocritical piety of Job's friends. Indifference is a form of murder, because it erases a person from our consciousness. Indifference is what most wounds the sick in today's hospitals at the hands of competent but detached health professionals.

Job was not indifferent to God as a Stoic or Existentialist might be. Nor was God indifferent to Job. He confronted Job eye-to-eye. He thundered at him. He did so because in Job's anger He detected love. And for his part, Job detected God's love for him even while he had to learn the impossibility of ever fully understanding evil.

### **Abide Complaints, Resentments**

We must abide the sufferer's complaints and resentments because the need to express them is a cry for help. All health professionals have an obligation to help the sick person to express these feelings in his own way. This is the first step toward healing the wounded humanity of the sufferer. Somehow we must help him heal his relationship with God, the cosmos, and his own humanity. Allowing the sufferer to reveal the content of his suffering is to respect his dignity as a person. It is one way to negate the alienation from the human community which the sick person so desperately feels.

Whoever opens himself to the revelations of the inner self of another assumes moral obligations. Too often, the patient stifles his anguish for

fear of ridicule and rejection. We must never belittle the sentiments of the sick, or take advantage of their vulnerability. To use that vulnerability to convert, or to proselytize, is to usurp the place of God with Whom the only meaningful confrontation can occur. That is what Job's friends did to the disgust of both God and Job.

This does not mean that we must be altogether mute, that we are not to offer spiritual consolation, or help the sufferer find meanings in his sufferings. We can respond to his probings, share our own faith and convictions and our own questionings and prayers with him. What he needs most is our compassion — a conviction that we genuinely feel something of his predicament, that we understand its uniqueness and impenetrability. This impenetrability does not dissolve the common bond of humanity between us. It is this bond that ties us to all suffering humankind.

If we, too, have suffered affliction, we must beware of using the sick person as an excuse to exhibit it, to impress him with our experience, or to assuage our own anguish. Some of the more zealous organized efforts to help others to “deal with” their grief can trample on the uniqueness and privacy of the experience. There is no “approved” way to suffer, grieve or die. But whatever way fits the patient, he can be helped if we listen, meditate his questions with him, avoid reproach, and avoid trying to win a debate.

Some of the sufferer's troubles will be self-generated to be sure: the result of his own acts or attitudes to suffering itself. Nonetheless, we do best if we hear out the patient's lament and absorb some of his hostility and resentment. To do so is not to praise or agree with it. This is a bogus brand of compassion, cheaply bought and cheaply given, more suited to mutual self-satisfaction than genuinely helping.

Often the patient has a profound need to lash out in frustration at someone or something. Often, it is those nearby — the doctor, nurse, or family — on whom the hostility is displaced. C. S. Lewis put it this way:

All that stuff about the cosmic sadist is not so much an expression of thought as of hatred. I was getting the only pleasure a man in anguish can get, the pleasure of hitting back.

Physicians and others who receive these lashings must understand their origin, must absorb some of the hostility, and must not strike back. To strike back, or to avoid the patient is to neglect a prime moral imperative of the professional healer.

Many of the complaints we hear today about the aloofness, inhumaneness, and indifference of modern medicine arise from the neglect by physicians and nurses of the vivid lessons Job teaches. Much of the current emphasis on “humanism” in medical education derives from a need to inculcate some measure of compassion in the physician's education. Without compassion, the physician's competence can be damaging or simply self-serving. Job's text is an indispensable *vade mecum* for those

who presume to help and heal the sick and the suffering.

We can speak of healing even if the patient is beyond our help scientifically. Reflecting on Job's experience, it was not death he feared so much as abandonment, the injustice he saw in his afflictions, the lack of a chance to make his case heard, to confront his God, to be able to abjure the indifference of the cosmos to his plight. Limited as our powers may be, the true healer is committed to helping the patient to reassemble his life to the extent possible even in fatal illness. We may not be able to reexpand the contracted horizon of possibilities, but we can help the afflicted person make his own response in his own way, and, thus, restore some of the wholeness of his person lost in the assault of illness.

For those who have a religious faith, hope can be restored, not necessarily in recovery, but in reassembling some meaning to life that lies in the possibilities of a personal response to suffering. Even in naturalistic terms, suffering is not without value to the sufferer and those around him. No one has understood this better than Miguel de Unamuno. Only a few quotes from his *Tragic Sense of Life* will suffice:

Suffering is the substance of life and the root of personality for only suffering makes us persons. (224)

Suffering is a spiritual matter and the most immediate revelation of consciousness, and it may be that our body was not given to us except as a means of suffering. Whoever has never suffered much or little has no consciousness of himself. (231)

For in truth, human beings love each of the spiritually only when they have suffered the same sorrow, when they have ploughed the stony earth joined together by the mutual yoke of a common grief. It is then that they know one another and feel for and feel with one another in their common anguish and pity one another and love one another. (149)

Miguel de Unamuno's profound insights into human suffering reveal the possibilities of personal growth inherent in anguish. His observations are first steps to the deeper understanding that comes from religious faith. I have not attempted to deal at this level because others have done so eloquently. I have confined myself to a meditation as a physician. But as a believing Roman Catholic Christian, I see the existential predicament of the suffering human, as Job did, as primarily a spiritual and religious experience. Pope John Paul II, in his beautiful apostolic letter, *On Human Suffering*, has summarized what the Christian faith teaches about suffering and healing to those who profess it.

Job's text can be read on many levels. Only one has occupied me here: the text's sublime evocation of one human being's encounter with the most universal experience of all — suffering and illness. No matter what progress medicine may make, how long it may extend our lives, or how carefree our existence may become, the experience of suffering will remain, and will not deviate much from Job's account.

Job's text will always inspire, instruct, and intrigue every age to come.

For the physician and the nurse, it is an indispensable textbook. But it is a book for all of us, especially today when we equate the experiences of illness and healing with a commodity transaction or an experiment in applied biology, or the fixing of a piece of machinery or an opportunity for medical entrepreneurship. Suffering and illness are extravagant contradictions to our Promethean aspirations. We see those who succumb to them as a scandal. So we sequester them in hospitals and nursing homes; we complain about how much they cost us and how much they demand of our time and energy. We urge them to die sooner, or we deny them life entirely when they are malformed before or after birth.

Our age needs to ponder the Book of Job so as to regain its bearings, to understand that the sick and suffering have a moral claim on us. For the doctor and nurse, Job remains the text par excellence which teaches what suffering is about. For the rest of us, it is the reminder of the confrontation we cannot escape, the confrontation which paradoxically, as Unamuno said, ". . . is the substance of life and the root of personality for only suffering makes us persons."

Job is, and will remain, the book we must all eventually live. It comes as close as any book to what Carlyle called it, "the greatest book ever written with pen." But the Book of Job is part of a greater book — the book which transcends literature and aesthetics and whose "very nature" it is to "affront, perplex, and astonish the human mind." (Merton 1)

Job is one of the oldest parts of the Bible. Early on, God issued His powerful challenge to our demands for justice. Centuries later, He challenged us again. Paul Claudel puts it this way:

We have reached Gethsemane. This is not the story of a rich proprietor's loss of his estates, of a family's loss of its children and of bone and flesh being seized upon by a blind and ignorant enemy. This is Gethsemane, where God was made man. God took upon Himself all the horror of mankind. Behold old Job! You asked for Justice and here He is in answer to your plea. You asked Him to appear as an equal. He has done that. What have you to say? (Claudel 9)

For some of us, this is the answer to Job's and our own odyssey through anguish to the fulfillment prophesied by Isaiah, "He was bruised for our iniquities and the chastisement of our peace was upon him and with his stripes we are healed." (53:5)

For others, the mystery remains. The magnificence of Job is not that we can question it for answers, but that it questions us, and poses the right question. For the physician, Job is his patient and himself. Sickness is the event that forces the question upon modern man. How will we respond? How will we help others, and ourselves, when the inevitable overtakes us?