

HELPING THE SUFFERING MOVE TOWARD FLOURISHING  
SPIRITUAL CARE BEYOND LIVABLE DISAPPOINTMENT AND  
COMMON UNHAPPINESS

By

J. Jeffrey Fletcher

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First Faculty Reader: \_\_\_\_\_

Professor George Schmidt

Second Faculty Reader: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Graham Reside

Director of the DMin Program: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Melissa Snarr



## **Dedication**

I dedicate this project to my beloved wife, Karen Burnham Fletcher. She has been on this journey with me for 40 years. She has shared in both my greatest joys and been my support in times of deepest sorrow. Together we have known the joys and challenges of our 11 children and 16 grandchildren. I would not have been able to complete this project without her.

## **Acknowledgments**

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Soli Deo Gloria!

## **Abstract**

The places where chaplains perform ministry have them caring for suffering people. A common goal of psychiatry has been “to transform unbearable pain into livable disappointment”(Meador). Utilizing resources from philosophy, diverse religious and spiritual traditions, with particular emphasis on the author’s Judeo-Christian tradition, and positive psychology, the author seeks to help chaplains and other caregivers to equip suffering people to aspire for more than a livable disappointment to pursue a telos of human flourishing. Flourishing takes two forms, penultimate and ultimate. This project will take seriously the reality of pain and suffering and offer resources to pursue penultimate flourishing amid suffering and for those who desire, a path toward ultimate flourishing. Utilizing both inpatient and outpatient practices and group processes we will provide resources for well-being and ultimate flourishing.

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### **A Case Study and Question**

Susan had end-stage COPD and was a patient I was supporting. At sixty, she had lived a hard life and struggled with addictions. Her supportive sisters were attentive but also weary from caring for a sibling with multiple addictions. Her physician was frustrated because her prognosis was poor, and there was no clear path for her care plan. She had been in hospice care, but she fired her hospice provider. She was relying on morphine to help her breathe. Without morphine, she had a hard time breathing, which increased her anxiety and reduced her quality of life. She could not continue on morphine as an outpatient unless she agreed to go back into hospice care. Her sisters were reluctant to return to hospice, as it was difficult for them to accept that she was medically not going to improve and hospice was seen as “giving up.”

The physician invited me to join her in a meeting with the patient, the social worker, and the patient’s sisters. After a lengthy discussion where both the physician and social worker were making little progress communicating with the patient and her sisters, I asked the question, “What is the one thing that is most important to you, that you would like to do when you leave the hospital?” At that point, her entire demeanor changed, and her face brightened. She began to talk about her love of painting and her desire to make a painting of her two adopted grandchildren. She said she had been imagining it in her mind's eye, picturing how she would paint it, and dreaming about giving this lasting gift to her family. We then discussed what medically would allow her to pursue that goal. If she returned to hospice care, she could continue to receive morphine for her breathing and receive support to be able to return to her home and paint. She agreed and her sisters supported her decision.

After the physician and social worker left, she happily showed me several pictures of her original paintings. She was at peace, hopeful, and excited to have a plan in place to help her

pursue her goals. Neither Susan's diagnosis nor her life expectancy changed during that conversation. She was still expected to die. The peace was due to finding a way for Susan to flourish by doing something that she deeply wanted to do. She was able to express love, value, and creativity, while still acknowledging the reality that she would likely die from her disease. In this way forward, she was able to receive the support needed to help her achieve that goal. Susan was going to continue to have some pain, suffering, and loss AND she was able to find a way to find meaning, hope, and a flourishing life amid that suffering.

Susan's case illustrates the primary question that my project will address: *How can chaplains and other spiritual caregivers assist those who experience pain, suffering, and loss to both acknowledge their suffering, not minimizing or negating it, AND also move towards having a flourishing life in which they find meaning, happiness, and hope?*

### **Introducing the Problem of Suffering and Flourishing**

In his closing lecture of the MHICS portion of the Integrative Spirituality and Mental Healthcare Chaplaincy D.Min. program, Dr. Keith Meador offered the following definition of psychotherapy: "We seek to transform unbearable pain into livable disappointment."<sup>1</sup>

Sigmund Freud, the Viennese father of psychoanalysis, once told one of his patients, "Much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this modest goal of Dr. Freud was born out of his years of experience in listening to the neurotic complaints of the Viennese *Frau's* who came daily to his office to tell their dreams, nightmares, and suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Keith Meador, closing presentation of MHICS portion of Vanderbilt Divinity School D.Min intensive, December 8, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York:Basic Books, 1957).

In the movie, *As Good As It Gets*<sup>3</sup>, the main character, played by Jack Nicholson, has been struggling with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and now has a new love interest whom he does not want to drive away. After desperately asking his psychiatrist for help his character walks out into the waiting room with other patients and asks this question: “What if this is as good as it gets?”

During my forty years of ministry, I have seen others experience both great joys and extreme suffering. I have experienced suffering in my own family and personal life including early deaths, divorce, mental illness, and my diagnosis and treatment of prostate cancer.

Pain, loss, and suffering are ubiquitous in the places chaplains and other spiritual caregivers serve. High levels of PTSD and moral injury, increasing suicide rates<sup>4</sup>, bereavement, substance use disorder, and mental illness are all challenges faced by active-duty military and those in the VA as well as in civilian hospitals and other places where chaplains serve. Among those who provide health care in these settings, there are high levels of burnout, secondary traumatic stress/compassion fatigue, and moral injury. Rates of physician burnout are increasing and, nationally we are facing a potential massive shortage of physicians in the next few years.<sup>5</sup>

### **Ministry Context**

My primary ministry context is Warren County Virginia, approximately 70 miles west of Washington DC. According to the 2020 census, the percentage of the population with a

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<sup>3</sup> *As Good As It Gets*, directed by James L. Brooks, featuring Jack Nicholson, Helen Hunt and Greg Kinnear (Sony Pictures, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> For Example: In the Army there was a year over year increase in suicide from January to March 2023. Steve Beynon, *Army Report Shows Increase in Suicides by Active-Duty Soldiers in 2023*, Military.com, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/07/05/active-duty-army-suicides-service-struggles-prevention-efforts.html>. (Last accessed February 20, 2024.)

<sup>5</sup> A projected physician shortage of up to 124,000 by 2034. Association of American Medical Colleges Report, *The Complexities of Physician Supply and Demand: 2019-2034*, June 2021, <https://www.aamc.org/media/54681/download>, (Last accessed February 20, 2024).

bachelor's degree in Warren County is 22% compared to the national average of approximately 35%. This is contextually significant based on the research of Case and Deaton who found that "Deaths of Despair", including death by suicide, overdose, and alcoholic liver disease, are highest among middle-aged white males without a 4-year bachelor's degree.<sup>6</sup>

For Americans without a bachelor's degree, marriage rates are in decline, though cohabitation and the fraction of children born out of wedlock continue to rise. Many middle-aged men do not know their own children. They have parted from the woman with whom they once cohabited, and the children of that relationship are now living with a man who is not their father. The comfort that used to come from organized religion, especially from the traditional churches, is now absent from many lives.<sup>7</sup>

Because of these and other factors, many elements of life that previously led to wellness or human flourishing are now absent from lives in a significant portion of the community in which I minister.

People will always face challenges, including pain, loss, and brokenness. In this project, there will be no attempt to minimize suffering or enter the realm of toxic positivity.<sup>8</sup> Pain will be acknowledged, and lamented with the recognition that life does have these challenges. Physical and emotional pain, loss, and suffering are real and affect people every day. AND yet, under the right conditions, those who are suffering can still find ways to live a meaningful and flourishing life. Our goal includes identifying strategies to avoid the suffering caused by the second arrow, finding ways to go beyond "common unhappiness" or "livable disappointment" within the context of our suffering, and discovering ways to flourish and live a meaningful life.

Chaplains are well positioned to offer support for those suffering from existential despair. Helping people identify and access potential sources that contribute to a flourishing life is a

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Case; Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition, 2020), 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Case, Deaton, *Deaths of Despair*, 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Toxic positivity will be defined later in this project. (see pg. 15, foot note 46).

worthwhile pursuit and has the potential to contribute to patients, staff, and the overall health of the community. I will explore how chaplains can support staff by bringing a spirit of playfulness and lightheartedness into care teams that can model and promote resiliency. I claim that it is possible to experience pain, suffering, and loss and still experience a life that has meaning and potential flourishing. I will draw from ethnographic studies by listening to the voices of those who have suffered and found ways to have meaning and flourish in their lives, and I will explore philosophy, psychology, sociology, theology, and theological reflection.

Some of the tools under consideration are drawn from virtue ethics, following the tradition of Aristotle as a way of building character strengths that contribute to *Eudaimonia*, or well-being. Positive psychology provides another set of rich resources for well-being and human flourishing. This would include gratitude, hope, joy, awe, beauty, and community. Cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness, in the form of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), provide another set of potentially useful resources in the pursuit of human flourishing with special regard to values in ACT.

Theologically, an exploration of meaning in the Biblical wisdom literature will be a rich resource, with particular emphasis on Ecclesiastes and how it envisions flourishing. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is especially suited to human flourishing, along with other Christian writings. Attention will also be given to other religious and spiritual traditions including Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, and their approaches to well-being.

I will also consider group formation and the potential to create outpatient support groups for those who want to pursue human flourishing, including overall wellness programs and specific programs for staff and particular faith communities. All of these programs have a common vision to help those who suffer lament their losses, find meaning, and seek ways to

achieve flourishing. The hoped-for outcome will be a replicable model that can be used in hospitals and communities to promote meaning and flourishing to the suffering while also improving the quality of life for potential victims of deaths of despair. My ultimate driving purpose and vision is to join the mission of Jesus who came “that we might have life, abundantly” and who offered his friends “*shalom*.”<sup>9</sup>

### **A Deep Dive into Pain and Suffering**

People who experience pain, suffering, and loss paradoxically can and do experience meaning and true flourishing during those difficult times. Theologically, both flourishing and pain appear very early in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. In Genesis 1-2, God creates an earth that is flourishing in its vegetation and animal life. God pronounces that the creation is good. God then creates human beings to live as stewards over the good creation and to promote flourishing by caring for creation and being fruitful and multiplying to fill the flourishing earth with God’s image bearers. When humans live according to the pattern given by the creator, they flourish.<sup>10</sup> However, when humans defy the prescribed pattern, they experience the consequences of pain, suffering, and ultimately death.<sup>11</sup> Flourishing is still possible, but it coexists with pain and loss.<sup>12</sup> Amid this suffering, all of creation groans<sup>13</sup> and strains toward future redemption through Jesus Christ. Jesus, himself, was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with suffering”<sup>14</sup>, but he provides the path to final flourishing when there will be an end to pain and suffering.<sup>15</sup> Jesus

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<sup>9</sup> John 10:10; John 20:19 “Peace be with you.” Literally “shalom.”

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 3.

<sup>12</sup> See Psalm 90 and Psalm 127.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 8.

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 53.

<sup>15</sup> Revelation 21.

came to show the way to experience abundant life.<sup>16</sup> As Jesus' followers wait for all things to be made new and for the end of suffering and death, they are warned that they will continue to experience troubles, but they can live in faith and hope resulting in a flourishing life.<sup>17</sup>

There is much to draw from in Christian and other spiritual traditions to help one to experience meaning and flourishing in times of pain, suffering, and loss. Still, chaplains and other spiritual caregivers face the reality of the need to offer care and support to a diverse society that is not actively religious. To find ways to help people experiencing pain and suffering learn to flourish and find meaning, we will need to draw on resources from the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, sociology, and medicine.

What do we mean by pain, suffering, flourishing, and meaning making? Pain is “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage.”<sup>18</sup> Pain is subjective and includes both intensity and unpleasantness. “Pain is whatever the patient says it is.”<sup>19</sup> In our hospital, we ask patients to rate their pain from 1-10. When my son was sixteen, he had a ruptured appendix. When asked to rate his pain in the emergency room he said, “Three.” The physician indicated that he had a very high pain tolerance and that should be factored into his life going forward. If he ever felt pain at a higher level and said he was an eight or nine, it would be very serious or life threatening and he should not delay seeking medical help.

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<sup>16</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>17</sup> “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel B. Hinshaw, *Suffering and the Nature of Healing*, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), 60.

<sup>19</sup> Hinshaw, *Suffering and the Nature of Healing*, 60.

Pain is more than simply physical discomfort; it can also include psychological, social, and spiritual distress.<sup>20</sup> This moves the issue of pain into the area of meaning and the experience of suffering. Eric Cassell defined suffering as “the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person... Suffering is experienced by persons.”<sup>21</sup> Suffering ‘occurs when impending destruction of the person is perceived; it continues until the threat of disintegration has passed or until the integrity of the person can be restored in some other manner. It “occur[s] in relation to any aspect of the person, whether it is in the realm of social roles, group identification, the relations with self, body or family or the relation with a transpersonal, transcendent source of meaning.”<sup>22</sup>

Suffering impacts a person’s personality, character, family dynamic, roles, relationships with their self, capability, habits, physical body, unresolved personal issues, perceived future, and their views of the transcendent dimension or life of the future.<sup>23</sup> “Typically, suffering involves a symptom or symptoms that threaten the integrity of the patient as a person. The meaning that a given symptom has for the individual patient defines the nature of the suffering experienced e.g., if cancer-related pain is progressing, the fear of impending death can cause intense suffering.”<sup>24</sup>

I can look through the lens of my own experience of pain and suffering for additional insight. In 2016 at the relatively young age of fifty-two, I learned I have moderately aggressive prostate cancer. I elected to have radical surgery to remove the prostate followed by forty

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<sup>20</sup> Total Pain- experienced as physical, psychological, social, and spiritual distress.- C. Saunders and N. Sykes- The management of Terminal Malignant Disease. P. 1-14. Quoted in Hinshaw, *Suffering and the Nature of Healing*,49.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Cassel, The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1982, March 18, 306 (11), 639-45.

<sup>22</sup> Hinshaw, *Suffering and the Nature of Healing*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Hinshaw, *Suffering and the Nature of Healing*, 52-53.

<sup>24</sup> Hinshaw, *Suffering and the Nature of Healing*, 59.



radiation treatments. I experienced physical pain in the immediate aftermath of the surgery. I underwent functional changes, some loss of identity, adjustments in my relationship with my wife, death anxiety, and spiritual distress. For me, psychological, existential, and spiritual pain caused more suffering than actual cancer, surgery, and radiation. The surgery and radiation were not able to remove 100% of the cancer from my body. I continue to have my blood monitored every six months and annual CAT and bone scans. Recently I learned that I have metastatic cancer and began hormone deprivation therapy with its accompanying side effects. I am aware that I am living with cancer. The degree and extent of the cancer probably will not cause my imminent death, and the hope is that with the treatment I will live many years. However, psychologically, the knowledge that I have cancer produces some level of anxiety every time I have follow-up tests.

In the midst of my existential pain and suffering, I am supported by my faith in God, my family, my church family, and my sense of calling associated with my vocation as a chaplain and pastor. I also utilize humor as a source of coping along with prayer, mindfulness, the daily practice of gratitude, and other spiritual disciplines. As a result, I can utilize my experience of living with cancer as a source of personal growth<sup>25</sup> and increased empathy that helps me offer care to others who are suffering. I can function as a “wounded healer.”<sup>26</sup>

When describing pain and suffering there is a certain degree of challenge in that the two concepts overlap; however, we should note that there are also some distinctions. The source of

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<sup>25</sup> Posttraumatic Growth first began to be named this way in 1995, however... “For thousands of years, there have been stories of positive changes in individuals and societies in general as a result of suffering and distress. The potential for transformative positive change from the experience of great challenge and despair is referred to in the texts and teachings of all major religions and is reflected in the writings of ancient philosophers and scholars of other disciplines.” Richard G. Tedeschi, Jane Shakespeare-Finch, Kanako Taku, and Lawrence G. Calhoun, *Posttraumatic Growth, Theory, Research, and Applications*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer, Ministry in Contemporary Society*, (New York: Image Doubleday), 1972).

pain is generally something physical or biological that is taking place in the body that causes a measure of discomfort. After the cause of the pain has been relieved, the physical pain usually fades away. Suffering has to do more with the meaning that we attach to the pain. We may even choose to hold onto the pain of perceived suffering after the physical aspect of the pain has subsided.<sup>27</sup>

Buddhism speaks about the two arrows of suffering. Whenever we suffer misfortune, two arrows fly our way. To be struck by the first arrow is painful; being struck by the second arrow is more painful and likely produces true suffering. The Buddha explained: “In life, we can’t always control the first arrow. However, the second arrow is our reaction to the first arrow. The second arrow is optional.”<sup>28</sup> Essentially, it is our emotional response to pain that creates true suffering. I could have responded to my cancer diagnosis by engaging in any one of the following behaviors: Substance abuse, rage, and violence against others; turning away from my faith in God or my connection to my religious community; cutting myself off from my family; or even self-harming behaviors. If I had done so, my degree of suffering would have increased. I would have done far greater damage to myself with the second arrow of suffering than the first arrow of the cancer diagnosis. As a Christian, I have access to the hope that comes from my faith in Jesus Christ who said, “In this world, you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world.”<sup>29</sup>

In my experience of helping manage pain and suffering, I am aware that many do not have the knowledge or access to the same psychological, spiritual, relational, or material

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Marcus, *The Psychoanalysis of Overcoming Suffering, Flourishing Despite Pain*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Desiree Anderson, *The Second Arrow of Suffering*, Grand Rapids Therapy Group, Jan. 15, 2021, <https://grandrapidstherapygroup.com/second-arrow-of-suffering/>.

<sup>29</sup> John 16:33.

resources I have to help them cope with pain and suffering. Their suffering is often increased by behaviors consistent with the second arrow of suffering. As noted above in Case and Deaton's research on deaths of despair, there are increasing rates of suicide, overdoses, and alcoholic liver disease, all of which could be characterized as the result of the second arrow of suffering.

Chaplains and other spiritual caregivers are well-positioned to provide education, training, and resources to help people respond to the pain of the first arrow of suffering in ways that are more life-sustaining and lead to more flourishing and less self-destructive behaviors. In the second half of this project, we will explore more fully the ways that chaplains and other spiritual caregivers can mitigate the potential damage of the second arrow of suffering.

"Life is difficult... the process of confronting and solving problems is a painful one."<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, all too often when people try to avoid confronting or solving problems in a positive or productive way, they create far worse problems for themselves. In failing to deal in a healthy way with the first arrow of suffering, they suffer in far more intense ways when the second arrow hits.

Some of us will go to quite extraordinary lengths to avoid our problems and the suffering they cause, building the most elaborate fantasies in which to live sometimes to the total exclusion of reality. In doing so, we proceed far afield from all that is clearly good and sensible to try to find an easy way out. In the succinctly elegant words of Carl Jung, 'Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering.' But the substitute itself ultimately becomes more painful than the legitimate suffering it was designed to avoid.<sup>31</sup>

I once visited a hospitalized patient who was in the midst of a total crisis. This man, in his sixties, had seen his entire life implode within a matter of a few months. He had gotten bored with his marriage of many years and fell prey to an internet catfishing fraud. He was convinced

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<sup>30</sup> Peck, M. Scott, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, (New York: Touchstone, 1978), 16.

<sup>31</sup> Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, 17.

that he was helping a beautiful young Russian woman get free of her abusive boyfriend by wiring her money. He sent her tens of thousands of dollars, which ultimately wiped out all of his savings. When his savings were gone, he mortgaged his business. She continued asking for more money, and he was so deep into his fantasy that he borrowed additional money from family and friends to continue to send her money. By the time he entered the hospital, he had lost all of his money, his home, his business, his marriage, and most of his family and friends. As I listened to him tell this depressing tale of self-destruction, there was still a part of him that was holding out hope that the beautiful young Russian woman was real, not a catfishing scam. He hoped that despite all rational evidence to the contrary, still somehow, she was real and they would be together. In his case, the neurotic delusion that he would end up with a young Russian woman caused him infinitely more suffering (the second arrow) than the boredom (the first arrow) of his long-term faithful marriage.

In his book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker traces much of mental illness and substance abuse to the human attempt to deny the reality of death. He observed, “Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing.”<sup>32</sup> Becker, rightly, I believe, traces much of our current second-arrow suffering to the many ways we neurotically try to avoid accepting our mortality. He goes on, “The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation, but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.”<sup>33</sup>

Psychologist David Richo wisely observes that one path toward true happiness comes from embracing the “givens” of life. Some things simply cannot change, and the sooner we learn

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<sup>32</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 11-24.

<sup>33</sup> Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 11-24.

to accept those givens the more satisfaction we will discover in life. One of those givens is, “Pain is a part of life.”<sup>34</sup>

Acceptance of the givens of life is the basis of much of the 12-step recovery movement. The well-known serenity prayer begins, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”<sup>35</sup> The ability to discern between what one cannot change and what one can change lies at the heart of transformation and healing. Accepting the reality of pain as part of life makes one better able to respond in a healthy, life-giving way to pain, thus being less susceptible to the second arrow of suffering. As Scott Peck goes on to say, “Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”<sup>36</sup>

A key role of chaplains and all spiritual caregivers is helping people find meaning in their pain and suffering. Milton Yinger asks, “Does life have some central meaning despite the suffering and the succession of frustrations and tragedies it brings?”<sup>37</sup> Anthropologist Clifford Geertz answers in the affirmative: “As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering, but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others’ agony something bearable, supportable- something, as we say, sufferable.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> David Richo, *The Five Things We Cannot Change: And the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*. (Boston: Shambhala, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Credited to Reinhold Niebuhr. Utilized by Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step support groups.

<sup>36</sup> Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 6.

<sup>38</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” Michael Banton, Ed. *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, (London: Routledge, 1966), 1-46.

Psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl gave much of his post-Holocaust attention to unpacking ways to find meaning amid suffering. He observes, ‘If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete.’<sup>39</sup> C. S. Lewis believes that pain serves a very important spiritual purpose. He states, “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>40</sup>

In the hospital where I serve, pain is usually the catalyst for people to seek help. Most often, it is physical pain and, often, pain from life choices, such as smoking, uncontrolled diabetes, or substance abuse. The members of the healthcare team work to alleviate their symptoms of pain and correct the underlying causes of physical pain but generally do not spend a lot of time addressing the meaning of their pain. Often, there is a much deeper story that the patient is trying to tell. They need someone willing to take the time to truly listen deeply and see the full extent of their pain. This is holy and hard work. As Parker Palmer rightly says, “One of the hardest things we must do sometimes is to be present to another person’s pain without trying to ‘fix’ it, to simply stand respectfully at the edge of that person’s mystery and misery. Standing there we feel [useless and powerless.]”<sup>41</sup>

The Judeo-Christian tradition has a deep history of sharing in the pain of others. “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep”<sup>42</sup> is a foundational principle of the Christian faith. Christians have a savior who was “a man of sorrows, acquainted with

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<sup>39</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 67.

<sup>40</sup> CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 91.

<sup>41</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak, Listening to the Voice of Vocation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 63.

<sup>42</sup> Romans 12:15.

suffering.”<sup>43</sup> The Judeo-Christian tradition has the practice of praying prayers of lament as an important way of making meaning during pain and suffering. Lament is “a prayer of pain that leads to trust.”<sup>44</sup> Examples of lament fill the Psalms and book of Lamentations and come in four basic movements: “turn, complain, ask, and trust.”<sup>45</sup> Lament does not go down the road of toxic positivity.<sup>46</sup> It rightly acknowledges the reality of pain, but rather than be hit by the second arrow of suffering by neurotically avoiding the reality of pain, lament turns toward God and offers a complaint to God. Psalm twenty-two is a great example of a psalm of lament, one that Jesus prayed while on the cross. The prayer begins by turning toward God, first saying, “My God, my God”, but then follows with a complaint “Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?”

Often, I find people who, in their pain, have turned away from God. I once visited an older woman who was hospitalized and in pain. I introduced myself as the chaplain and began a spiritual assessment.<sup>47</sup> I asked her about her faith or if she was part of a faith community. She responded, “I believe in God, but we haven’t spoken much since God let my daughter die.” This opened the way to her sharing thirty-year-long deep pain and her hurt and a deep sense of abandonment by God. I joined her in lamenting her loss by turning toward God after many years

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<sup>43</sup> Isaiah 53:3

<sup>44</sup> Mark Vroegop- *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy, Discovering the Grace of Lament*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019),28

<sup>45</sup> Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> “Healthy positivity means making space for both reality and hope. Toxic positivity denies an emotion and forces us to suppress it. When we use toxic positivity, we are telling ourselves and others that this emotion shouldn’t exist, it’s wrong, and if we try just a little bit harder, we can eliminate it entirely.” Whitney Goodman, *Toxic Positivity, Keeping it Real in a World Obsessed with Being Happy*, (New York: Penguin Random House: 2022), 12.

<sup>47</sup> Spiritual assessments are recommended by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. SA are “critical for helping professionals to develop some understanding of clients’ basic worldviews’ ...for many individuals, spirituality is central to their understanding of themselves and the world around them.” David R. Hodge, *Spiritual Assessment Handbook for Helping Professionals*, (Bedford, CT: North American Association of Christians in Social Work), 2003.

of turning away from God. She could turn toward God with her hurt feelings of abandonment, as a prayer of lament.

The final two movements of lament are boldly asking God for what one wants and then placing trust in God no matter the outcome. In Psalm twenty-two, the bold requests include, “Come quickly to help me, deliver me, rescue me, save me.” This bold prayer ultimately leads to a statement of trust: “He has not hidden his face...but has listened to his cry for help.... Future generations will declare his righteousness.” The lament starts with a sense of abandonment but then turns the focus to God. The prayer states the complaint, moves to a bold request for help, and ends in a statement of faithful trust and commitment to God.

Chaplains are spiritual caregivers who are willing to enter into the deep pain of another - to allow them a safe space to bring the pain, complaint, and feeling of isolation and abandonment from God. Chaplains help them put into words their requests, can help people make meaning out of their suffering which leads to a deepened experience of faith, moving them toward increased flourishing. I believe it is in this movement from suffering to finding meaning in the suffering that opens the potential to go beyond Freud's modest goal of “transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness” or Keith Meador’s necessary but incomplete goal to “transform unbearable pain into livable disappointment.” I believe the true telos of spiritual care can be flourishing.

## **Flourishing**

What does it mean to have a flourishing life full of meaning, joy, and hope? We have begun to see how the practice of lament can serve as a bridge to move the person in pain and suffering to move toward meaning. We now want to consider how that meaning can move someone toward a flourishing life. People have been talking about what a flourishing life looks



like for thousands of years, from Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes and Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>48</sup> to Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount to Martin Seligman and the positive psychology movement of the last thirty years.

For Aristotle, the goal was the ideal of a fully flourishing human being... someone who has lived up to his or her full potential, displaying a complete, rounded, wise, and thoroughly formed character. This particular goal, for which Aristotle used the word *eudaimonia*, is ‘happiness’ but Aristotle meant it in a technical sense that is closer to our idea of flourishing.<sup>49</sup>

The Hebrew word *shalom* captures this idea well and “one can be described as flourishing when all the parts of one’s life, health, economics, interpersonal relations are functioning together in harmony and completeness.”<sup>50</sup>

For Martin Seligman, the goal of positive psychology is “to increase the amount of flourishing in your own life and on the planet.”<sup>51</sup> Seligman uses the acronym PERMA to define the measures of human flourishing: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Meaning, Accomplishment, and Positive Relationships. The Harvard Human Flourishing Program looks at flourishing in terms of “Meaning and Purpose, Happiness and Life Satisfaction, Character and Virtue, Mental and Physical Health, and Close Social Relationships.”<sup>52</sup>

Western forms of Buddhism add another dimension to flourishing. Seth Segall describes the movement: “We want to lead decent and happy lives, and we want our children to live them, too. We want to participate in communities that foster virtue, promote opportunities for

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<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Tr.F.H.Peters.

<sup>49</sup> N.T. Wright, *After You Believe, Why Christian Character Matters*, (New York:HarperCollins, 2010), 33.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mt. And Human Flourishing*, (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2017), 72.

<sup>51</sup> Dr. Martin Seligman, *Flourish, A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 26.

<sup>52</sup> <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>.

meaningful and rewarding work and relationships, are relatively free from coercion, and support our growth as unique human beings.”<sup>53</sup>

Irene McMullin recognizes the inter-relatedness of our self-fulfillment, our responsibility to others, and our shared relationships with everyone in the community. Flourishing has a first, second, and third-person dimension. She concludes, “Flourishing is living an excellent life. But there are multiple domains of human excellence, the excellence of becoming the best self that one can be, the excellence of answering fully to the legitimate claims of others, and the excellence of establishing and maintaining the objective standards and institutions that enable us to share the world.”<sup>54</sup>

Jesus speaks of flourishing in terms of God’s original intention as divine image bearers living and working together on God’s good creation to produce fruitfulness. Jesus describes himself as being “the way, the truth and the life” who came so that we might have abundant life.<sup>55</sup> This flourishing comes to fullness in the kingdom of God or eternal life/life of the age to come. Then there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain.<sup>56</sup> We can begin to experience in the present the life of the kingdom, which is within us now.<sup>57</sup> A life of blessedness/happiness/flourishing can begin now for those who humbly follow Jesus. For Jesus, true flourishing comes by loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbors, and by seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.<sup>58</sup> Paradoxically, this flourishing can

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<sup>53</sup> Seth Zuiho Segall, *Buddhism and Human Flourishing a Modern Western Perspective*, (Cham, Switzerland: PalgraveMacmillan, 2020),182.

<sup>54</sup> Irene McMullin, *Existential Flourishing, a Phenomenology of the Virtues*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 226.

<sup>55</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>56</sup> Revelation 21:1-5.

<sup>57</sup> Luke 17:20-21.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew 5-7. Pennington believes that a good translation of the Greek word Makarios is Flourishing. See Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 41-67.

only happen by denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and following Jesus.<sup>59</sup> The person who is full of the spirit of God will live a fruitful life and give evidence of that spirit by the fruit of the Spirit, which is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”<sup>60</sup>

For 2000 years, Christians have found different ways to describe this kind of flourishing. Irenaeus said, “The Glory of God is a human person fully alive,”<sup>61</sup> and the Westminster Catechism says, “Man’s Chief End is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”<sup>62</sup>

One of the simplest and clearest definitions of flourishing comes from theologian Miroslav Volf who defines it as a “life lived well, life going well, and life feeling good.”<sup>63</sup> As a chaplain working with people who have experienced some measure of pain, suffering, and loss, we do want to help mitigate their “hysterical misery” or “unbearable pain” and move them toward living a meaningful life that avoids the self-wounding of the second arrow of suffering. We desire to move them toward a life that is lived well, going well, and feeling good. We desire to move them towards flourishing.

Positive psychology, classical virtue ethics, and Christian theology and practice share much in common. As the percentage of the Western world that is Christian continues to diminish with the rise of the “nones,” (those with no religious affiliation) chaplains need to draw

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<sup>59</sup> Matthew 16:24.

<sup>60</sup> Galatians 5:22-23.

<sup>61</sup> This quote is attributed to Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, however according to Matthew J. Thomas there is no place in Irenaeus’ writings where this exact quote can be found, but it can be extrapolated from his writings. See Matthew J. Thomas, *Is the glory of God man fully alive? Irenaeus, the human life, and the vision of God*, <https://www.academia.edu/45620082> *Is the glory of God man fully alive Irenaeus the human life and the vision of God*. Last accessed, February 17, 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Q. 1. What is the chief and highest end of man? A. Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever. Westminster Larger Catechism, <https://opc.org/lc.html>. Last accessed, February 17, 2024.

<sup>63</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing, Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 75.

from the common pool of resources that lead to flourishing and utilize language that can be appropriated by those who don't have a Christian or theistic worldview.

Theology need not agree with all of Positive Psychology's presuppositions and methods...[however] the character strengths and virtues that many Christian psychologists study, including gratitude, forgiveness, love, and hope resonate deeply with, even derive from Christian sensibilities. Theological language may well be 'dusty' in a psychologically oriented culture and exchange with psychology will surely enhance and respect theology's understanding of some of its own deepest commitments.<sup>64</sup>

In summary, certain elements of human flourishing are best addressed by religion in general and the Christian faith in particular, but many of the virtues, values, and methods can be accessed by people who do not claim faith in God. The key is for chaplains to place these practices that lead to flourishing in a context that is accessible even to those who do not specifically follow Christ. It could be argued that they are not likely to experience the full benefits of flourishing that can be achieved by following "the full package", but accessing some light, some healing, and some measure of flourishing can move them closer to the goal of finding meaning and hope, thus making them less susceptible to the second arrows of suffering.

The chaplain's ministry is not limited to patients within the hospital or even to their families and other visitors. Another significant portion of the chaplain's ministry context is the staff. Healthcare chaplaincy occurs in a context that is becoming progressively more challenging. Staff is susceptible to all of the types of pain and suffering that patient's experience, and they are susceptible to additional pain and suffering that comes with their

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<sup>64</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *Flourishing in Faith, Theology Encountering Positive Psychology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 17.

vocation. Burnout, secondary traumatic stress, PTSD, and moral injury are vocational dangers that affect a large portion of healthcare workers.<sup>65</sup>

Contextually, a large percentage of healthcare workers, especially physicians, and nurses in my setting are non-native to our community and demographically diverse from the population they serve. As part of a smaller, more rural hospital system, the financial resources needed to attract healthcare workers with greater experience or from prestigious medical schools are limited. Consequently, many of the healthcare team members in the hospital are young or first-time providers or nurses and do not have a long history with the institution. Staff turnover is high as the top-performing healthcare team members quickly move to larger institutions in the Northern Virginia metro Washington D.C. area where they can make more money. These high turnover rates lead to instability and less sense of connection between medical staff and nursing.

As a result, educational, economic, and other social challenges to wellness or human flourishing impact the patients, family members served, and the staff who provide the service. Chaplains can and should utilize the same tools that lead to flourishing in their care of staff.

As this project unfolds, we will examine more deeply the potential strategies to address pain in productive ways, safeguarding those who receive care from self-destructively adding to their suffering with the second arrow. This will be done by utilizing lament and meaning-making and then taking further steps to help people lead lives that are ‘lived well, going well, and feeling

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<sup>65</sup> “Before COVID-19 overtook U.S. hospitals, 40 percent of nurses and 38 percent of physicians reported experiencing some symptoms of burnout. By 2022, 50 percent of nurses and 63 percent of physicians did.”

Martha Hostetter, Sarah Klein, Responding to Burnout and Moral Injury Among Clinicians, The Commonwealth Fund, August 17, 2023, <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/2023/aug/responding-burnout-and-moral-injury-among-clinicians>. (Last accessed February 20, 2024.)

good, 'i.e., lives that are flourishing. We will explore ways that chaplains can facilitate both individual and group processes for meaning making and flourishing.

Theology is what everyday people do when they try to make sense of the teachings that come from their religious traditions, especially when they try to think through the practical applications of their beliefs.”<sup>66</sup> It can be hard not to opt for easy answers or quick fixes, not to spiritualize our problems or turn them into abstractions, and instead be inconvenienced by actually changing our ways so that others might do a little better.<sup>67</sup>

I now constructively theologize about finding meaning and flourishing amid pain, suffering, and loss.

### **Biblical Theology of Flourishing**

In his *Biblical Lexicon of Happiness*,<sup>68</sup> Michael J. Chan surveys scriptures that relate to the subject of happiness, joy, flourishing, well-being, and fulfillment. He reveals how widespread flourishing is throughout the Bible.

Alongside happy texts, these same scriptures describe the range of human brokenness and suffering including alienation, blame, guilt, anger, murder, divorce, depression, despair, war, famine, rape, and other forms of sexual violence, grief, acute and chronic illness, and all other manners of death and destruction. The Bible gives voice to the full range of human experiences and emotions. It does not shrink from addressing all of life, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Within the first four chapters of the book of Genesis, we have a picture of a good God who creates a good and flourishing world, places humanity in a vibrant garden, and invites them to become full participants in a delightful earth. There is intimacy and close fellowship between

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<sup>66</sup> Laurel C. Schneider and Stephen G. Ray Jr., eds., *Awake to the Moment* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2016), 1-2.

<sup>67</sup> Schneider and Ray, *Awake to the Moment*, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Brent A. Strawn, ed. *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 323-370.

humans and God. This beautifully creative and fruitful life is ruptured by disobedience, which leads to alienation from the creation and the creator, hard and often frustratingly non-productive labor, and ultimately death. The remainder of the Biblical story speaks of God's plan to repair the breach and bring all creation back to the desired state of true and full flourishing.<sup>69</sup>

Jonathan Pennington summarizes biblical flourishing with three primary concepts: shalom/peace, happy/blessed, and whole/complete.<sup>70</sup> He claims that:

Human flourishing must be rediscovered as a central part of the Bible's teaching on salvation and redemption. God is not unconcerned about our well-being and happiness; peace, happiness, blessedness, health, joy, and abundance of life are the consistent message of Scripture and the goal of God's work. We should cease thinking of spirituality and godliness as something that has nothing to do with human well-being and flourishing, including in a physical, economic, psychological, and relational sense.<sup>71</sup>

The outgrowth of this privileged place for flourishing in Pennington's theology is that Christians must understand flourishing to be a central part of the church's mission.

If God's goal in redemption is the restoration of our full humanity and our God-centered human flourishing, then there is no doubt that the mission of the Church—God's people on earth—should be the same. Our theological reflections and their practical outworking must be to bring true human flourishing to individuals and society as a whole. This must be motivated, informed, and colored by the reality of God's coming kingdom [...] Without this anchoring, the pursuit of human flourishing is not biblical. But this spiritual understanding does not make it less physical and practical. Seeking social justice, racial equality, economic flourishing, and peace is not an optional part of the Church's mission nor a minor alleyway. These are practices that testify to the reality of God's coming reign and are in alignment with what God himself is doing.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Revelation 21:1-5.

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Pennington, *A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing* (Institute for Faith, Work and Economics, 2015), Pennington-A-Biblical-Theology-of-Human-Flourishing.pdf.

<sup>71</sup> Pennington, *A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Pennington, *A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing*, 17.

### **Jesus and Flourishing While also Suffering**

Flourishing while suffering is a central part of Jesus' teaching. A good translation of Matthew 5:4 is "Flourishing are the mourners for they shall be comforted."<sup>73</sup> Jesus claims to have come so that we may have abundant life,<sup>74</sup> and describes this as an eternal life that comes from knowing God as a loving parent,<sup>75</sup> loving God and loving one's neighbor.<sup>76</sup>

Jesus never guarantees there will be no trials or painful struggles. He warns that there will be pain, suffering, and loss when he states, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."<sup>77</sup> One can experience peace, even flourishing, amid trouble.

Jesus models flourishing during painful circumstances while suffering on the cross. Jesus used the spiritual disciplines that were part of his heritage while suffering. He prayed a Psalm of Lament when he said, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?"<sup>78</sup> He extended forgiveness to his tormentors, graciously provided hope to one of his fellows being executed, offered concern and care for his mother, and humbled himself and trusted fully in the mercy and love of his father at the time of his death.

After his crucifixion, Jesus modeled ultimate flourishing by entering into immortality in a body that is no longer subject to death and decay. Christ rose from the dead. He has all authority in heaven and earth, and so, he appoints his disciples to go share with all creation the message of God's kingdom and the path to abundant life.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, XV.

<sup>74</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>75</sup> John 17:3.

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 22:37-40.

<sup>77</sup> John 16:33.

<sup>78</sup> Psalm 22:1.

<sup>79</sup> Matthew 18:18-20.



## **Apostolic Reflections on Flourishing**

Paul and other apostles take up the call to proclaim the good news of Jesus and a life of ultimate flourishing. One theologian claims that Paul's writings are "invitations to Paul's churches to pursue a way of life, a way of human flourishing that takes its starting point from the person of Christ."<sup>80</sup> Paul writes in service to humanity's "pursuit of the good life."<sup>81</sup> In contrast to Greek philosophers and other religious traditions' teachings about the way to a life well lived, Paul centers his understanding of flourishing fully on the life and teaching of Jesus. For Paul, "relation to the person of Christ is humanity's supreme good and is, therefore, necessary for human flourishing." This leads to Paul's teaching about morality and character, community and love, and practices for living a good life.<sup>82</sup>

## **Flourishing in Christian Spirituality and History**

### **Ignatian Spirituality**

The founder of the Catholic order of Jesuits provides the foundation of his view of human flourishing. (*See Appendix F*). For Ignatius, well-being comes from realizing our purpose and ordering our lives around that purpose.

Ignatius taught his followers consistent practices to help them remain conscious of God's active engagement in their lives. The Prayer of Examine includes the following: 1. Gratitude to God for elements of the day. 2. Review of the day when God was present and where one turned toward or away from God. 3. Sorrow for the times one turned away from God. 4. Ask God for forgiveness and make plans to forgive and reconcile those who hurt you. 5. Ask God for the grace

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<sup>80</sup> Joshua W. Jipp, *Pauline Theology as a Way of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 3.

<sup>81</sup> Jipp, *Pauline Theology as a Way of Life*, 86.

<sup>82</sup> Jipp, *Pauline Theology as a Way of Life*, 86.

for the day to come and the ability to recognize where God is present.<sup>83</sup> This practice helps the practitioners experience greater well-being by maintaining conscious contact with God.

### **Ultimate and Penultimate Flourishing**

“Human flourishing in the present age will always be partial at best, subject to limitations, hindrances, and tragic conflicts between genuine goods.”<sup>84</sup>

St. Augustine taught that our greatest desire is happiness, which happens in relation to God. He contrasts the city of God and the city of Man.<sup>85</sup> The city of God is our final eschatological hope that is fully realized in the eternal State. The city of man is our present, earthly life in this current age. Augustine observes that too often people believe that happiness is achieved by pursuing what our senses desire now, in the city of man. However, for Augustine, this is not true happiness, just temporal pleasure. One can call this fleeting satisfaction penultimate happiness, while the one found in the city of God is ultimate happiness.<sup>86</sup>

There is an “ambivalent character of the present world”<sup>87</sup> with a mixture of both good and evil. The failure to understand and accept this mixture of good and bad can lead to distorted theology.

### **Flourishing and Over-Realized Eschatology**

A theological perspective that leads to unrealistic expectations by some Christians is over-realized eschatology.

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<sup>83</sup> Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living* (Penguin Random House, 2023), 269.

<sup>84</sup> Neil Messer, *Human Flourishing, A Christian Theological Perspective, Ch. 10* in Matthew T. Lee, Laura D. Kubzansky, And Dylar J. Vanderwelle, *Measuring Well-Being*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>85</sup> For an excellent overview of Augustine’s theology of happiness see Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 25-62.

<sup>86</sup> See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics quoted in Neil Messer, Human Flourishing in *Measuring Well Being*, 285-304.

<sup>87</sup> Messer, *Human Flourishing*, 285-304.

An “over-realized eschatology” is evident when someone expects that the ultimate hope of Christianity can be fully experienced here and now. They might say, “Well, if Jesus has come and the Kingdom has come, then there should no longer be evil in the world, everyone should be healed of sickness, there should be no poverty or suffering, and everything should be the way that God designed it to be NOW, and if you believe well enough, or have enough faith, you will experience it.”<sup>88</sup>

However, both the Bible and actual human experience prove that there is still evil and suffering in the world, even for people of faith. A biblical metaphor that helps capture this mixture of good and bad in this present time is dawn.

“Dawn is that in-between time after the first light of morning has broken the darkness of night—but before the sun has crested the horizon and driven out night’s darkness completely. During the dawn, light and dark are both present at the same time, yet neither are present in full force; the darkness is not as dark as it once was, and neither is the light as bright as it will be. The promise of dawn is that the shift from night to day will come; it has begun and will not regress. Its full fruition is only a matter of time.”<sup>89</sup>

Christian chaplains helping people explore ways to pursue a flourishing life need to set appropriate expectations. This can be a challenge for those who have an over-realized eschatology that conflates penultimate and ultimate flourishing. Good health, healing from diseases and a long life may be reasonable desires for Christians, but these are penultimate goals. As Neil Messner says, “Heath is penultimate, not an ultimate goal.”<sup>90</sup>

During the Covid crisis when our hospital had restricted visitation to only end-of-life patients, I was seeing a patient who had serious Covid disease and was hospitalized for over two months, as his lungs got worse. He had very strong faith and believed that he would get better. I

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<sup>88</sup> <https://www.epm.org/blog/2022/Jun/3/over-realized-eschatology>. Accessed October 13, 2023\

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.epm.org/blog/2022/Jun/3/over-realized-eschatology>. Accessed October 13, 2023\

<sup>90</sup> Mesner, *Human Flourishing*, 285.

stood with him as his physician explained very clearly that his lungs were no longer working and would not be able to recover and he should prepare himself for imminent death. I asked him if he wanted me to ask his pastor to come for an end-of-life visit. He declined; still convinced God would miraculously heal him. For him, to ask for his pastor to come was to admit that he would die. Within two hours, he died. His over-realized eschatology resulted in a vision of flourishing that was not able to see himself in that ambivalent state of dawn. He expected a greater level of flourishing than was likely at that time, causing him to be cut off from an important source of spiritual support, a visit from his pastor at the end of his life.

### **Under-Realized Eschatology**

Some argue that at the opposite end of the spectrum is an under-realized eschatology that fails to appreciate any present reality of the kingdom of God. This is equally bad theology.

While it is certain that we cannot experience the ultimate flourishing of immortality at this time, we can still experience what Jesus called “abundant life”, “blessedness”, or “flourishing” now.

Yes, there is sickness; suffering, evil, and death, but even in the midst of these, there are fruits of the spirit: love and joy, peace and patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.<sup>91</sup> Prayer is effective, and healing does occur in this present time. While Christians still grieve the deaths of those whom we love, our grief is not like those who have no hope.<sup>92</sup>

While it is damaging to expect too much flourishing in this age, it is equally damaging to expect too little. God has placed the desire for flourishing in each person.

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<sup>91</sup> Galatians 5:22-23.

<sup>92</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

## Christian Hedonism

Christian hedonism is a term used to articulate a vision of happiness. The Westminster Larger Catechism states, “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever.”<sup>93</sup> Christian hedonism adapts this by claiming, “The chief end of man is to glorify God *by enjoying* him forever.”<sup>94</sup> In Christian hedonism, the desire for happiness is normal, can be usefully placed in service to God, and ultimately find its fulfillment in God. The second-century theologian, Irenaeus wrote, “The glory of God is man[sic] fully alive.”<sup>95</sup> Christian hedonism takes these words of Irenaeus and fleshes them out with an extensive theology of Christian flourishing.

Christian hedonism allows for suffering. One might consider the example of Jesus who “for the joy set before endured the cross... and sat down at the right hand of God.” (Hebrews 12:2). Paul’s main desire was “to know Christ and to share in his suffering so that he might also attain to the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>96</sup> For both Jesus and Paul, their willingness to endure suffering was fueled by their desire for ultimate flourishing. The pain caused by trials can actually lead to joyful flourishing when the believer keeps in mind the *telos* of life. Suffering can help bring to completion our purpose of bearing the image of God and bringing glory to God.

This paper views suffering and flourishing primarily through the lens of a Christian worldview. However, flourishing is a key element of many faith traditions. (*See Appendix D*).

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<sup>93</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-larger-catechism> Accessed December 2, 2023.

<sup>94</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God, Meditations of a Christian Hedonist, Revised*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), 18.

<sup>95</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter 20.7 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103420.htm> Accessed December 2, 2023. (See note 53 above for fuller context).

<sup>96</sup> Philippians 3:8-11.

## Flourishing on the Edges of Faith

James Hudnut-Beumler documents the rising number of religious “nones” in the United States, particularly in the 18-29 year old demographic.<sup>97</sup> Of these religious nones, 25% either don’t believe much or act on their faith. Nearly 60% of nones are agnostics or skeptics.<sup>98</sup> Nones are increasing in number and fall on the far edges of or boundaries beyond religious faith. How can the tools of spirituality be utilized to help this group explore flourishing?

Dr. DeCourt is the founder of the Institute for Faith and Flourishing. He describes people looking for spiritual practices to help them flourish in a nonreligious environment.<sup>99</sup> These people have either rejected God out of anger, have drifted away from active faith missing its benefits, or simply don’t know what they believe anymore.<sup>100</sup> Dr. DeCourt defines flourishing as “a life that is growing in being more fully alive. It’s deeply rooted, increasingly open, and courageously energized with a radical love that can endure through our most distressing experiences of pain, conflict, and death.”<sup>101</sup> DeCourt uses the Lord’s Prayer as the basis for a spiritual practice that leads toward flourishing in ways that promote the love of neighbor and community. This robust view of flourishing takes seriously the call to suffering as a path to flourishing.

*(Those wishing to explore flourishing through the lens of philosophy see Appendix G.)*

Robert Leslie looks at Jesus’ ministry through the lens of the search for meaning. He sees, in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, a picture of how her failure to find

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<sup>97</sup> James Hudnut-Beumler, *Religion in 21st Century America*, Lecture for Vanderbilt Divinity School Doctor of Ministry Program.

<sup>98</sup> Hudnut-Beumler, *Religion*.

<sup>99</sup> Andrew DeCourt, *Flourishing on the Edge of Faith*, (Washington, DC: BitterSweetBooks, 2022), p. Ivii.

<sup>100</sup> DeCourt, *Flourishing on the Edge of Faith*, xvii

<sup>101</sup> DeCourt, *Flourishing on the Edge of Faith*, Xxix.

meaning led to an existential vacuum. Jesus helped her to discover meaning in that vacuum which changed the trajectory of her life and pointed it toward flourishing.<sup>102</sup>

Viewed through the lens of Logotherapy, the biblical book of Job, can be understood with greater insight and meaning. Lewis states, “Yahweh is not a God who takes away pain, or who carefully correlates the elements of existence to exhibit a pattern. He is essentially the ‘something outside’ that gives meaning to an absurd existence by the hope that there is an ultimate meaning, an ultimate plan.”<sup>103</sup>

Understood in this way, to experience well-being one need not always experience happiness. Even while suffering, one can discover the meaning of life that leads to experiencing life in its fullness. Bonhoeffer, a person who experienced profound suffering, said, “Personal suffering is a more useful key, a more fruitful principle than personal happiness for exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action.”<sup>104</sup>

David McPherson argues, “Human beings are fundamentally and distinctively the meaning-seeking animal.” He continues, “We are concerned with how our lives fit into the grand scheme of things and whether there is a cosmic or ultimate source of meaning to which we must align our lives.”<sup>105</sup>

True flourishing is about connecting to something greater than the person and recognizing that there is something greater than our narrow lives. Happiness is more than the absence of pain and the pursuit of pleasure; it must be deeply connected to meaning and something greater than the individual self.

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<sup>102</sup> Robert C. Leslie, *Jesus and Logotherapy*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1965), 47-54.

<sup>103</sup> Marshall H. Lewis, *Viktor Frankl and the Book of Job, a Search for Meaning*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019), 122.

<sup>104</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer in DeCort, *Flourishing*, p. xxx.

<sup>105</sup> David McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

## Flourishing and Positive Psychology

At the start of the 21st century, psychology began to shift away from Freud's goal of "transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness." Dr. Martin Seligman began a movement to shift the focus of psychology away from a focus on pathology and mental illness to a focus on wellness and building on our strengths. Seligman built upon the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers to create a focus on positive psychology. Seligman states, "The goal of positive psychology in well-being theory [...] is to increase the amount of flourishing in your own life and on the planet."<sup>106</sup> The five elements of well-being in this theory are positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment (PERMA).<sup>107</sup> This program is well suited to both religious and non-religious contexts and has been successfully applied in diverse settings from military training to sports coaching to schools and business settings.

In their analysis of the data of the longitudinal study on Happiness from Harvard University, Waldinger and Schulz conclude that the most important factor in well-being is having positive relationships. They state, "Positive relationships are essential to human well-being."<sup>108</sup>

The United States Surgeon General's Report states that loneliness "harms both individual and societal health" and that "the mortality impact is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Seligman, *Flourish*, 26.

<sup>107</sup> Seligman, *Flourish*, 16-20.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, *The Good Life, Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023),29.

<sup>109</sup> U.S. Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, 2023.



During my studies with MHICS, I was introduced to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or ACT. ACT makes use of mindfulness practices to create flexibility in thinking and greater space to process thoughts and feelings that can lead to anxiety, depression and other painful emotional situations. Studies have been shown to demonstrate that ACT can be used to increase the level of flourishing among those struggling with mental health issues such as depression. In one study, it showed an improvement in flourishing between 5 and 28 percent.<sup>110</sup>

### **The Intersection of Positive Psychology and Theology**

Several theologians have explored places where positive psychology and theology come together to promote human flourishing.<sup>111</sup> Tim Harris suggests that positive psychology and theology have things to teach each other about human flourishing. Theology can help positive psychology explore the futility of attempting to achieve flourishing without entering into a relationship with God. Positive psychology can teach theology the value of holistic care, replacing the common dualism in many religious traditions.<sup>112</sup>

Ellen Charry concludes that learning to love as taught by divine wisdom leads to a joy that is the “pinnacle of human happiness” that “cannot be nullified by adversity.”<sup>113</sup> She states, “Knowing that God delights as we grow from strength to strength encourages those in the light to stay the course, enjoying their participation in God’s enjoyment of his cherished creation.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Flourishing in people with depressive symptomatology increases with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Post-hoc analyses of a randomized controlled trial  
Ernst T Bohlmeijer, Sanne M A Lamers, Martine Fledderus Behav Res Ther. 2015 Feb;65:101-6. doi: 10.1016/j.brat.2014.12.014. Epub 2014 Dec 27.

<sup>111</sup> *Flourishing in Faith Theology Encountering Positive Psychology*, Ambler, Anstey, Mccall and White; *God and the Art of Happiness*, Ellen Charry; *Flourishing, Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*, Miroslav Volf.

<sup>112</sup> Tim Harris, *Shalom, the Gospel and the Mission of God*, in *Flourishing in Faith*. p. 79.

<sup>113</sup> Charry, *God and the Art*, 277.

<sup>114</sup> Charry, *God and the Art*, 277.

Miroslav Volf of Yale Divinity School Center for Faith and Culture has done extensive work on the theology of human flourishing. He defines flourishing as a “life that is lived well, is going well, and feels good.”<sup>115</sup> While Volf acknowledges that various faith traditions have different ways of defining what constitutes life ‘well lived, is going well, and feels good.’ Nevertheless, he asserts that “all three components of flourishing are present in all world religions” with primacy going to a life that is lived well.<sup>116</sup>

### **Flourishing at the End of Life**

“Katie was dying, but also flourishing. In a sense, she was healthy! She was sixty, in the last lap of MND, (Motor Neuron Disease) ... Her communication was by blinking the Morse code. Her carers were enlarged through being with her; she had a sense of joy grown quiet within her paralyzed body. She achieved her dying, with a sense of flourishing in the waiting.”<sup>117</sup>

A woman named Reena, who was attending a Human Flourishing conference, was dancing with a vase of flowers on her head. What was striking is that Reena had no arms; they had been removed after an electrical shock in childhood. Through her treatment and therapy after her double amputation, she was so moved by the love and care she received from hospital staff that she was inspired to train to become a schoolteacher. She had found a way to flourish amidst the loss of her arms. Tuckwell uses the words of Bonhoeffer to help him reflect on Reena: “It is God’s call to be fully human, to live as human beings obedient to the one who has made us, which is the fulfillment of our destiny. It is not a cramped, compromised circumspect

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<sup>115</sup> Volf, *Flourishing*, 75.

<sup>116</sup> Volf, *Flourishing*, 75.

<sup>117</sup> Gareth Tuckwell, *Health, Dying and Human Flourishing*.

<https://faithinhealth.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/health-dying-and-human-flourishing.pdf>

life but a life to be lived in a kind of wild joyful full-throated freedom – that is what it is to obey God'. Reena has seemingly discovered the full meaning of that freedom.”<sup>118</sup>

Dame Cicely Saunders was the founder of the modern hospice movement. Her mission was driven by her desire to address “total pain” which has “physical, psychological, social, emotional and spiritual elements.”<sup>119</sup> Utilizing the concept of Frankl’s *Will to Meaning*, Saunders applied this to people at the end of life as she was convinced that people can be helped to discover meaning while dying. She writes of one example:

The less her body could do the more her spirit shone, in love and amusement and a clear-sighted wisdom concerning life and those she met. Body and mind are linked indissolubly but they are of much less account than the spirit whose purposes they serve. That is not only unique and irreplaceable; it is also indestructible, stronger even than the light and energy of the star which streams across the universe millions of years after its source has ceased to exist.<sup>120</sup>

This is a description of what flourishing while dying might look like. As hospice care addresses the needs of the whole person in the end stages of life, it creates supportive opportunities for people to flourish even while dying, achieving what Saunders called the goal of “a good death.”

After death, there are those who remain behind, grieving their losses. David Kessler builds upon the concepts of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross to include the “Sixth Stage of Grief” which he calls “finding meaning.” He argues that meaning can be discovered in the midst of every death and that every bereaved person is capable of finding meaning in the death of meaningful

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<sup>118</sup> Tuckwell, *Health*.

<sup>119</sup> David Clark, *Total pain', disciplinary power and the body in the work of Cicely Saunders, 1958–1967* [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953699000982?fr=RR-2&ref=pdf\\_download&rr=81d4c612e8ca5e74](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953699000982?fr=RR-2&ref=pdf_download&rr=81d4c612e8ca5e74)

<sup>120</sup> Gaudenz Urs Metzger, *A shelter from the abyss/ exploring Cicely Saunders' vision of hospice care through the concept of worldview*.pdf, <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/mitzvot-and-the-path-to-human-flourishing/> (Last accessed February 17, 2024).

others.<sup>121</sup> He calls the first step of finding meaning acceptance of the loss. There needs to be an openness to discover, or even change, meanings. There is an invitation to look more deeply into the question of “Why did this loss occur” and to discover ways to honor the loved one, to create a different life that includes the person who died, and how to use the experience to help others.<sup>122</sup>

Recently, a young man whom I baptized several years ago died by suicide. His grieving mother is using his death as a way to help other young people who are struggling. She hosted a fundraiser event in honor of her son for a youth center. In this way, she is seeking to find meaning out of the pain of his death. Is there hope for her to find some measure of flourishing as a bereaved parent of a child who committed suicide? I believe that her steps toward meaning making will help her to flourish even in the midst of her loss.

### **Applied Theology**

I am writing this doctoral project as a sixty-year-old white, Christian, cisgender, married male, hospital chaplain, pastor, doctoral student, father of eleven, grandfather of fifteen, living in beautiful rural Virginia, and currently under treatment for metastatic prostate cancer. I believe that I am living my life well, my life is going well, and it feels good in many ways. I look forward to most days. Each morning for the past five years as I drink my morning coffee, I write down three things for which I am grateful and one thing for which I am hopeful. I enjoy Facetiming with my children, grandchildren, and watching baseball on television and in person. I love sitting with my wife, watching the finches and hummingbirds at their various feeders out of my bedroom window. I have friends who I talk to and text. I like to play games with my family, including my 90-year-old mother who lives with me. I enjoy reading novels by James Patterson

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<sup>121</sup> David Kessler, *Finding Meaning, the Sixth Stage of Grief*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 25.

<sup>122</sup> Kessler, *Finding Meaning*, 111.

and John Grisham, my three black labs who sleep at my feet each night. After graduation, I am going with my wife to visit Hawaii and celebrate our fortieth wedding anniversary.

I have experienced pain in my life. My father died of cancer when I was thirty-seven, and I deeply grieved his loss. Some of my children were victims of child molestation by a trusted family friend, and the trial where he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison was emotionally devastating. I provided consistent spiritual care in my hospital and church throughout the entirety of the Covid-19 crisis and, at times, felt overwhelmed. I've been dealing with prostate cancer for over seven years and recently learned that it has metastasized to several places and requires additional treatment to extend my life. I have known pain, suffering, and loss, AND I love my life and feel like I am flourishing. My life has meaning, and I live in hope. This is what flourishing looks like for me.

What does flourishing look like for my pastor friend who is a sixty-five—year-old widower, with an amputated leg and is battling Parkinson's disease? What does flourishing look like for my sister with Down's syndrome? What does flourishing look like for the twenty-nine—year-old woman who, in the course of six weeks when she was ten years old, lost her grandmother to ALS, her mother to ovarian cancer, and her father to a sudden cardiac arrest? (*see appendix H*). What does flourishing look like for the twenty-something-year-old woman, from a conservative family and church that she wants to continue attending, who is a lesbian struggling to find someone to date who also shares her conservative values?

Human flourishing is a complex subject, and there is no one-size-fits-all absolute definition. As a hospital chaplain in a community hospital, I am called to provide spiritual and emotional support to patients' families and staff of all faith traditions and those who have no faith tradition. As a pastor of a local Church, I am called to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and

call my people into faith in Christ, which will lead them to experience ultimate flourishing in the Age to Come and penultimate flourishing now, even during trials and pain.

An important goal for me as a chaplain and pastor is to help people who are experiencing pain, suffering, and loss to still experience life that is flourishing and filled with meaning and hope. Presenting flourishing in the hospital setting is sometimes a challenge as it is a secular place with no agreed-upon ultimate set of shared meanings and spiritual values. As a chaplain, I cannot impose my faith on a patient, family, or staff member and tell them that they must believe or act in a certain way in order to achieve well-being. At the same time, I do believe in ultimate flourishing that is made accessible through faith in Jesus Christ. I believe that to follow the path of Jesus is to follow a way that leads to both penultimate flourishing now, in this present evil age, and ultimate flourishing in the age to come. I believe that the patients, families, and staff that I serve will have an opportunity to experience greater flourishing in life if they follow the path laid out by Jesus and by the faith in which I live.

As a chaplain of faith ministering in a secular context, I borrow from the words of Jeremiah to the people of Israel who were in exile, living in Babylon after the destruction of the temple: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”<sup>123</sup> I may not share the faith of all I serve, but I will do all I can to promote their well-being.

The principles of medical bioethics support patient autonomy. When I met with my oncologist to discuss my treatment plan, we had a very detailed conversation about my disease progress and prognosis, my goals of care, what treatment options were available, and the probable outcomes for choosing to follow or not follow a particular treatment plan. If the

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<sup>123</sup> Jeremiah 29:7.

physician had chosen to withhold from discussing with me medically sound treatment options as I was making my choice, I would consider that malpractice. At the same time, for him to impose his choice on me would have been unethical. He laid out for viable treatment options and me the important, relevant information and then, he answered my questions and allowed me to make my decision on how I wished to proceed.

As a chaplain providing spiritual care in helping people to achieve flourishing, I believe I must balance presenting potential and proven ways to achieve flourishing while not imposing my beliefs or preferences, making them available to the patient or care receiver if they choose to follow them. I can offer suggestions for the various ways that people define well-being and have them identify what it looks like for them. I can point them to practices that will likely lead toward flourishing and invite them to consider participating in those practices and offer help and guidance if they choose to accept and withhold coercion or judgment if they choose to reject what is offered. I will offer a program that utilizes the best practices from spirituality, positive psychology, philosophy, and other disciplines that are generally accepted as useful toward achieving wellness or penultimate flourishing and help the care receiver to apply them as they are willing and able to do so.

### **Putting the Theory into Practice**

Dr. Paul Kalanithi was an award-winning neurosurgeon at the top of his field and thriving in his mid-thirties with what appeared to be a successful career and life ahead of him. He was happily married, financially successful, and doing well. Following Volf's definition of flourishing, his life was 'lived well, going well, and felt good.'<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup>Volf, *Flourishing*, 75.

In the midst of this flourishing life, Dr. Kalanithi was diagnosed with an aggressive stage four-lung cancer. Aggressive attempts at a cure, or at least to prolong his life, met with temporary success, and in the midst of this, he and his wife became parents to a newborn daughter. During the final days of his life, Dr. Kalanithi could enjoy his new relationship with his daughter.

Dr. Kalanithi chronicles his end-of-life journey, and his quest to find meaning in the midst of it, in his autobiography *When Breath Becomes Air*.<sup>125</sup> Near the very end of his life, he offered the following reflections on the meaning of life in the face of human mortality. He states, “Money, status, all the vanities the preacher of Ecclesiastes described hold so little interest: a chasing after wind indeed.”<sup>126</sup> He offers the following message to his, at the time newborn, daughter: “Do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man’s days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing.”<sup>127</sup> He described enjoying his newborn daughter while dying of cancer as “sated joy.” For him, flourishing was no longer about career advancement, economic prosperity, or even being cured of cancer; instead, it was connecting with a person he loved.

When my father was at the end of his life, also with stage four cancer under hospice care at home, I asked him if he wanted to watch a baseball game. My dad loved baseball and had watched thousands of games in his life. His response to me was different, “I’ve wasted too many hours of my life watching baseball, I’d rather sit and talk with you.” For him, in that moment, flourishing was about spending time with me, his son.

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<sup>125</sup> Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*, (New York: Random House, 2016).

<sup>126</sup> Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*, 198.

<sup>127</sup> Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*, 199.



I am not yet at the end of my life, but living with stage four cancer myself has also impacted my understanding of human flourishing and what in life is most meaningful to me. I hope that what I have learned through academic and phenomenological research, theological reflection and my personal experience has equipped me to help others who experience pain, suffering, and loss to find a path towards flourishing that includes meaning and hope.

This subject of human flourishing has a long and rich history and spans disciplines from philosophy and psychology, sociology, religion, spirituality, and health care. All major religious traditions address it in various ways. There is no way to synthesize all of the research into one universal path to flourishing. What I am attempting to do is provide a means for people to explore what flourishing looks like for them at various stages of their lives and allow them to explore it based on their own particular values and religious or spiritual orientation.

Utilizing the concepts of penultimate and ultimate happiness (Augustine and Bonhoeffer), and the recognition that health is a penultimate goal (Messer), and that human flourishing in the present age is always partial, at best (Lee, Kubzansky, and Vanderwelle), I theorize that one way to help people explore human flourishing is to describe it in three different perspectives or lenses.

**Lens One: Natural Flourishing** is potentially available to all living things including plants, animals, and humans. Understood theologically, this flourishing comes from creation and it is found in the goodness of creation. We are given all of the basic resources required to thrive including water, air, light, nutrition, rest, purpose, and the potential for relationships with others. One need not believe in a god or even be sentient to benefit from creations' natural gifts that lead to flourishing. A rose does not understand itself to be a rose, but it can still be aesthetically beautiful. A person can live with a secular worldview, defined by Charles Taylor as

“disenchanted”<sup>128</sup> while still experiencing flourishing on this level. I believe that nearly all human beings can partake of natural flourishing. Many of the resources available through positive psychology and wellness programs can support natural flourishing

**Lens Two: Spiritual and Religious Flourishing** can be experienced now through various spiritual and faith-based practices and lived in hope for final or ultimate flourishing. It deepens the meaning of life and allows a greater ability to experience joy and gratitude by experiencing a deep connection to the spirit within. It is experienced both in solitary prayer and devotion and in connection with a community of faith where there is mutual sharing and support in both joy and sorrow. It can provide a level of healing that exceeds normal, natural healing. It is a level of healing in which the whole person is healed. Sometimes, it includes the curing of disease. Sometimes, it does not. Spiritual and Religious flourishing can be achieved in the midst of pain, suffering, and loss, even to the point of death. One can even face death with peace and joy because it is lived in the hope of final flourishing in whatever form that takes within a particularly spiritual or religious perspective including: eternal life, Heaven, Nirvana, endless rest, union with the divine or bodily resurrection to immortality. This is a penultimate flourishing that expands natural flourishing but stops short of final flourishing.

**Lens Three: Final or Ultimate Flourishing** is only possible in the future, in my particular religious tradition this happens in the final age, when, in what the Bible calls the Kingdom of God<sup>129</sup> or Age to Come, heaven and earth are fully reconciled and united, and God is experienced in a direct, unmediated form. It is anticipated in hope now and is received as a

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<sup>128</sup> Charles Taylor, *Western Secularity*, Chapter 1 in Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen, eds., *Rethinking Secularism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).31-53.

<sup>129</sup> A clear statement of my theological tradition’s understanding of the Kingdom of God and its relation to human flourishing can be seen in: Sean P. Finnegan, *Kingdom Journey, A Call to Recover the Central Theme of Scripture*, (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2023).

gift later for those who give their trust and allegiance to Jesus Christ. Other traditions have their own particular visions of what ultimate flourishing looks like. While we cannot experience final flourishing in the present, we can experience fuller flourishing now through living in hope the ultimate.

I will now provide examples of how flourishing looks within the three lenses. One of the common themes associated with flourishing in positive psychology is happiness. One search indicates that there were over 23,000 books about happiness or with happiness in the title available on Amazon in 2017.<sup>130</sup> Happiness has been under discussion by philosophers and religious sages for thousands of years. Jacques Ellul has done a thorough study of the book of Ecclesiastes. He notes that, paradoxically, the author of Ecclesiastes says that a life lived in pursuit of happiness is vanity. At the same time, humans should enjoy happiness as a gift that comes from the hand of God.<sup>131</sup> This paradox can be resolved by recognizing that happiness should not be pursued as ultimate flourishing, but that it can be enjoyed as a part of natural flourishing. “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a glad heart”<sup>132</sup> There is some natural benefit and enjoyment in the happiness that comes as a part of natural living, happiness is a part of natural flourishing and can be received and enjoyed as such.

Viewed through the second lens happiness expands to joy. David Brooks uses the metaphor of two mountains to describe a transition that occurs when a person grows from a focus on personal fulfillment and happiness to a life that is more others-centered and meaning-focused, which he calls the second mountain. Brooks writes:

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<sup>130</sup> Mike Indursky, *In Search of Happiness*, Huffington Post, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/search-happiness\\_b\\_1647207#:~:text=Yes, there are more than,overwhelming number of them are. Last Accessed February 19, 2024.](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/search-happiness_b_1647207#:~:text=Yes, there are more than,overwhelming number of them are. Last Accessed February 19, 2024.)

<sup>131</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being, A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 106-112.

<sup>132</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:24.

Happiness is the proper goal for people on their first mountain. And happiness is great. But we only get one life, so we might as well use it hunting for big game: to enjoy happiness, but to surpass happiness toward joy. Happiness tends to be individual; we measure it by asking, “are you happy?” Joy tends to be self-transcending. Happiness is something you pursue; joy is something that rises up unexpectedly and sweeps over you. Happiness comes from accomplishments; joy comes from offering gifts. Happiness fades: we get used to the things that used to make us happy. Joy doesn’t fade. To live with joy is to live with wonder, gratitude, and hope. People who are on the second mountain have been transformed. They are deeply committed. The outpouring of love has become a steady force.<sup>133</sup>

Viewed through the third lens of final flourishing, would be a vision of perfection, total bliss, described in various religious traditions as the kingdom of God, heaven, divine union, nirvana, paradise, or eternal rest. For many spiritual and religious people it is a vision seen through this lens of final flourishing that helps sustain them in natural and spiritual/religious flourishing and provides a greater depth of meaning to all of life.

### **Play and Flourishing**

One tool that can be used for flourishing that we have not yet considered is play. Professor Jaco Hammans notes that “the capacity to play is the ability to move effortlessly between illusion and reality.”<sup>134</sup> He continues, “Playing is to become a juggler, holding ever so loosely but with assurance knowing and not knowing, certainty and doubt, joy and sadness, belonging and alienation, pleasure and pain or whatever other emotions crowd the landscape of the soul...It does not deny reality, nor does it rob the imagination of vitality.”<sup>135</sup>

Brian Edgar notes the importance of play in envisioning future flourishing. “Living in the kingdom of God is very much like playing a game, in that it involves living or playing in a different world to the one that it otherwise inhabited.”<sup>136</sup> He notes that playing make-believe as

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<sup>133</sup> David Brooks, *The Second Mountain, the Quest for a Moral Life*, (New York: Random House, 2019),xxxiii.

<sup>134</sup> Jaco Hammans, *The Capacity to Play in Becoming a Pastor*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007.),149.

<sup>135</sup> Hammans, *The Capacity to Play* 150.

<sup>136</sup> Brian Edgar, *The God Who Plays, A Playful Approach to Theology and Spirituality*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017), 23.

children enables adults to “creatively conceive of and bring about new realities that previously only existed in their minds.”<sup>137</sup> This has a huge impact on the ability to move from natural flourishing to spiritual/religious flourishing by being able to playfully imagine final flourishing. “Although Christians live within the present reality of the world they are also able to conceive and actualize a new and different reality as part of the kingdom of God, as citizens of heaven and possessors of eternal life.”<sup>138</sup>

Stuart Brown reveals a neurological basis for play in that play “promotes the creation of new connections that didn’t exist before, new connections between neurons and between disparate brain centers” that he calls “divinely superfluous neurons” that are “essential to continued brain organization.”<sup>139</sup> Play contributes to natural flourishing and serves both spiritual/religious flourishing and points to final flourishing. Jürgen Moltmann makes this observation on the theology of play: “The meaning of Easter lies in the liberation from the compelling force of guilt and the compulsion to repeat evil. Easter opens up the boundary-crossing freedom to play the game of the new creation [ ]the cross of Christ [ ] does not belong to the game itself, but it makes possible the new game of freedom. He suffered that we may laugh again.”<sup>140</sup>

Sociologist Peter Berger takes up this theme of the role of play and laughter that shows how the natural flourishing benefits of play and laughter can serve to prepare us for spiritual/religious flourishing and final flourishing:

First, the comic transcends the reality of ordinary, everyday existence; it posits, however temporarily, a different reality in which the assumptions and rules of ordinary life are suspended. This is, as it were, transcendence in a lower key; it does not in itself have any

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<sup>137</sup> Edgar, *The God Who Plays*, 23.

<sup>138</sup> Edgar, *The God Who Plays*, 24.

<sup>139</sup> Stuart Brown, *Play, How it Shames the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, (New York: Penguin, 2009), 41.

<sup>140</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, tr. Reinhard Ulrich, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 32.

necessary religious implication but second, at least certain manifestations of the comic suggest that this other reality has redeeming qualities that are not temporary at all, but rather that point to the other world that has always been the object of the religious attitude. In ordinary parlance, one speaks of “redeeming laughter.” Any joke can provoke such laughter, and it can be redeeming in the sense of making life easier to bear, at least briefly. In the perspective of religious faith, though, there is in this transitory experience an intuition, a signal of true redemption, that is, of a world that has been made whole and in which the miseries of the human condition have been abolished. This implies transcendence in a higher key; it is religious in the full, proper sense of the word.<sup>141</sup>

Because of the immense value of play and laughter as seen through all lenses of flourishing, I have begun to incorporate play and laughter into my care of patients and staff. From the often humorous neckties that I wear to my playful interactions with physicians and other nurses, I bring play and laughter into the caregiving environment. In one brief example, there was an initiative in the hospital to reduce blood clots by making DVT prophylaxis a standard treatment for inpatients. Our chief attending physician would consistently ask of each patient in rounds “DVT prophylaxis?”. When this physician was preparing to take a new assignment, I created a laminated sign to be held up that said simply: “DVT Prophylaxis?” In addition to her and the team’s laughter at the moment, the sign stayed in regular use during team meetings, both as a reminder of the lessons this physician taught us and the importance of this element of care in helping patients flourish.

During Dr. Kalanithi’s time under treatment for his stage four cancer, he realized that he had been using science as a reason to explain his belief in the non-existence of God. He came to realize that when one makes science the basis for all reality it ultimately negates the search for meaning.<sup>142</sup> He was able to take the leap of faith that enabled him to accept God and opened the door to meaning. It was this openness to and acceptance of God that led to his ability to envision

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<sup>141</sup> Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter, the Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997), 205.

<sup>142</sup> Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*, 168-70.

spiritual and religious flourishing that he experienced when his daughter was born. He died in hope, trusting that he would experience final flourishing.

In my phenomenological research, I asked a group of clergy for examples, either in their own life or in their ministry, of people who had experienced pain, suffering, and loss and still experienced flourishing, meaning, and hope in their lives, and I requested the factors that contributed to their ability to flourish. One of the first responses I received was the following:

The first example that comes to mind is my own father, who died three years ago from cancer. He battled for two years from the time of his diagnosis. I firmly believe that more good came out of that period than bad. He experienced extreme pain and suffering in that time, but I believe it would better be characterized by hope and peace. We all witnessed love, support, and generosity from fellow believers. I could tell several stories about the generosity and love that surfaced during his plight. His own faith was strengthened to a degree I had never seen in him before. He became a walking testament to God's goodness and faithfulness. And lastly, my dad and I grew closer and had deeper conversations in that time than ever before. I consider it a true gift that I was able to be with him during that two-year period. And despite the many painful memories, I would argue that we experienced some of that human flourishing you describe despite the pain and suffering he went through.<sup>143</sup>

Anton Boisen, the first pioneer of Clinical Pastoral Education was a great proponent of phenomenological research through the methodology of studying the “living human document.”<sup>144</sup> As I study the living human documents of Dr. Kalanithi’s story, alongside this pastor’s story of his family and my own story, I see a common theme that shows the hope of ultimate flourishing as a way to experience greater flourishing, meaning and hope in the present.

I minister in multiple contexts including a secular hospital with patients and staff of all faiths and those who have no connection to any religious traditions, a local church with strong Christian commitments, and as a pastor to other pastors within my denomination. The people to whom I provide spiritual care would describe flourishing in a wide variety of ways, but I feel a

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<sup>143</sup> Personal correspondence, January 10, 2024

<sup>144</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Anton T. Boisen and Theology through Living Human Documents*, Pastoral Psychology, 1968, Vol.19 (7), 49-63.

strong call and challenge to help each person pursue flourishing to whatever degree they desire, utilizing whatever practices they choose.

### **Project Flourish**

Within the hospital setting, the primary vision for most of the practitioners; from the attending physicians to the nurses, various therapists, and discharge planners; is to help alleviate their patients' immediate suffering." To use the words of Dr. Meador, we are transforming their "unbearable pain to livable disappointment." My goal is to create a vision to help send them on a trajectory that points them to flourishing. My vision is to create a program called Project Flourish. I want to incorporate into patients' care plans a vision and opportunity to point them toward greater flourishing. I envision an outpatient program that assists them in exploring ways to facilitate natural flourishing<sup>145</sup> and, for those who are willing to consider a faith-based component, a path towards spiritual and religious flourishing with an ultimate vision and hope of final flourishing.<sup>146</sup> There will be opportunities to explore individual and communal lament.<sup>147</sup>

Steps to pursue this vision of Project Flourish would include adding issues related to flourishing into their spiritual assessments. Their discharge plans would include not only plans for medication or additional testing, physical therapy, nutritional consultations, and follow-up appointments but also a general plan to pursue flourishing at whatever level for which they are ready and comfortable. I would provide outpatient groups that would focus on natural flourishing, using teaching and exercises from positive psychology and behavioral therapy, with an option to follow up with spiritual/religious flourishing utilizing faith-based spiritual disciplines and teaching and built on faith-based flourishing.

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<sup>145</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>146</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>147</sup> See Appendix C.



Project Flourish will also give opportunities for pursuing flourishing to members of the healthcare team. There will be training opportunities to learn about flourishing in their own lives and how to add a vision of flourishing to their care plans for patients. By seeing how a vision of flourishing and practices that lead to flourishing benefit them, they will have a greater appreciation for how to help their patients gain that vision for themselves.

Project Flourish will extend into the wider community by equipping clergy and local faith groups to provide opportunities to explore and pursue flourishing in their communities. I will provide training for both clergy and lay leaders who will lead flourishing groups in their congregations and the community.<sup>148</sup>

One of the key underlying principles of Project Flourish is the value of social connection. Research ranging from *Harvard's Longitudinal Study of Human Happiness* to the recent *Surgeon General's Report on the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* emphasizes the importance of social connection to overall health and well-being. For this reason, the goal of Project Flourish will be the pursuit of flourishing within the context of a supportive community. Attention will be given to group formation and healthy group dynamics.<sup>149</sup>

While post-traumatic growth and human flourishing are not identical processes, we will utilize evidence-based principles of PTG to address areas where suffering is caused by trauma.<sup>150</sup>

We will see how art and neuroarts can contribute to flourishing.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> See Appendices A-C.

<sup>149</sup> Rupert Brown, Sam Pehrson. *Group Processes, Dynamics Within and Between Groups*, Third Edition, (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020).

<sup>150</sup> Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku and Calhoun. *Posttraumatic Growth*, 71.

<sup>151</sup> Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross, *Your Brain on Art, How the Arts Transforms Us*, (New York: Random House, 2023).

## **From Suffering to Meaning**

Those who come to the hospital for care are almost always experiencing some degree of suffering. Showalter and Van Tongeren envision the process of finding meaning in suffering akin to the 5 stages of the night. Stage 1, Sunset, is the time of initial suffering when the patient is experiencing disorientation and isolation. The chaplain caregiver can help them to assess their sense of meaning and become stabilized. Stage 2 is Dusk where the patient moves further into the pain and darkness into the area of acceptance of the suffering. Stage 3 is Midnight and involves the deconstruction of beliefs. As a part of their spiritual suffering, it could include wrestling with concepts such as “Why did God allow this to happen?” or “Good people shouldn’t suffer; only bad people suffer.” Stage 4 is Dawn, which is a period of reconstruction and exploring new meanings that come through the experience of suffering. Stage 5 is Daylight and opens the way toward living connected with their newly discovered meanings.<sup>152</sup> As part of the chaplain's assessment and care the patient can be helped to work through this process of moving from sunset to dawn, from suffering to newly discovered meaning, to begin to explore what flourishing can look like.

### **A Process for Flourishing Informed Spiritual Care**

Holistic spiritual care can be envisioned as a Five Phase Process.<sup>153</sup> Phase 1 is to identify spiritual needs. Phase 2 is to participate in the meaning making matrix. Is the spiritual need primarily secular, spiritual, or religious? Phase 3 is to create a treatment plan. How will the spiritual needs be addressed? Phase 4 is to provide spiritual care. Providing interventions to meet

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<sup>152</sup>Van Tongeren, Daryl R.; Showalter Van Tongeren, Sara A.. *The Courage to Suffer: A New Clinical Framework for Life's Greatest Crises* (Spirituality and Mental Health) . Templeton Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>153</sup> Ricko Damberg Nissen\*, Dorte Toudal Viftrup and Niels Christian Hvidt, *The Process of Spiritual Care*, *Frontiers in Psychology* | www.frontiersin.org **1** September 2021 | Volume 12 | Article 674453. (Last Accessed January 19, 2024).

the spiritual needs best. Phase 5 is to assess and move forward, called the evaluation. How have the interventions helped to meet the spiritual needs, and what changes need to be made in the plan?

Spiritual care planning will be enlarged to consider ways to help the care receiver pursue flourishing, meaning, and hope. Basic needs would correspond to the lens of natural flourishing. Spiritual and religious needs would correspond to the second lens of flourishing. For those who are facing end-of-life care or actively dying, the needs could be all three, with particular attention to spiritual and religious needs preparing for final flourishing.

Dr. Neal Messer describes flourishing as a human creature as fulfilling “the goods, goals and ends that belong to this kind of creaturely life.”<sup>154</sup> He envisions flourishing through what Karl Barth names as freedom for life to be a physically embodied creature,<sup>155</sup> Messner says, “We might think of health...as the fulfillment of some penultimate human goals and ends of life: those that have to do with sustaining our integrated, physically embodied lives. It is a real and great, but penultimate good, not of ultimate importance.”<sup>156</sup>

Health is a part, but not the whole of human flourishing. The role of the chaplain is to help the patient, their support, and the clinical team, to identify what is important for the flourishing of the patient. Patient treatment plans will then be tailored to what flourishing is for this patient. (*See Appendix E for a possible spiritual assessment utilizing flourishing.*)

As the chaplain assesses the patient’s needs and goals around flourishing, meaning, and hope, they can prioritize and develop plans to pursue those desires and goals that are most important and provide guidance in pursuing those goals. The treatment plan would include

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<sup>154</sup> Messer, *Human Flourishing*, 289.

<sup>155</sup> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics in, *Human Flourishing*, 289.

<sup>156</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 290.

exercises and activities that lament losses and promote flourishing as well as resources available in the community. Social connections are incredibly important, so outpatient groups would be available to pursue further exploration of both natural and spiritual/religious flourishing.

The hospital system for which I work contains as part of its vision this statement: “*Inspire hope and promote health.*”<sup>157</sup> One definition of hope based on the writings of Søren Kierkegaard is “to expect the good,” and such hope is “based on the possibility of progress towards good in the future.”<sup>158</sup> I envision the role of the chaplain is to help launch our patients who are in the hospital towards a good and more flourishing life. Instead of the second arrow of suffering, I imagine that we are helping the people to whom we provide care launch themselves toward flourishing in a way that is targeted to achieve greater meaning with hope.

Snyder’s Hope Theory has three primary elements: *Goals, Pathways, and Agency*.<sup>159</sup> Goals are the target, the bulls-eye toward which people are aiming. Pathways are the workable routes that people envision to reach their goals. Agency is the ability or capacity to attain those goals.

In the opening story of my project, we looked at Susan, a sixty-year-old woman with end-stage COPD who had fired her hospice team, but her physician was having trouble working on a realistic plan of care. My assessment in my initial visit was that Susan needed a ‘What’ to help orient her ‘Why’ and ‘How.’ Her “What” goal was the bullseye. For her, being able to do her art and paint pictures of her grandchildren was the target for which she needed to aim. For her, flourishing was taking up her brush, dipping it in the paint, and putting it on canvas. Once she

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<sup>157</sup> <https://www.valleyhealthlink.com/about-us/> accessed January 19, 2024.

<sup>158</sup> Roe Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard On the Metaphysics of Hope*, The Heythrop Journal, 2011 Blackwell Publishing, 51-60.

<sup>159</sup> Snyder, Rand, Sigmon. Hope Theory: A Member of the Positive Psychology Family, chapter 3 Ed. Matthew Gallagher and Shane Lopez eds., in *The Oxford Handbook of Hope*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 27-43.

had her goal in sight, she could think about how to get there. Hospice, and the therapies available through hospice, were the pathway. She could be at home, be able to breathe, and get strong enough to begin painting. She had the agency to choose to reenter hospice care and receive their support. It was her choice; I simply helped her to see that she had the power to claim her choice and pursue her goal through the path of entering hospice care. What I was able to do in that moment was inspire hope and promote health.

Chaplains are an essential part of the healthcare team when they utilize their ability to listen, observe, and make assessments with an eye toward helping the patient see a vision for the possibility of flourishing. We provide leadership to the healthcare team by helping suffering people see the possibility of flourishing and meaning and pursue those goals in a hopeful way.

People will continue to experience pain, suffering and loss. Chaplains help them to lament those losses and find meaning. “Finding meaning can help transform already deeply painful experiences into something more without invalidating or excusing them.”<sup>160</sup> Chaplains have the opportunity to enter into other’s suffering, help them find meaning and a vision for potential future flourishing, and then, help them to *hopefully* find goals, pathways, and agency to that path of flourishing.

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<sup>160</sup> Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Sara A. Showalter Van Tongeren, *The Courage to Suffer: A New Clinical Framework for Life's Greatest Crises* (Spirituality and Mental Health). Templeton Press. Kindle Edition.

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## **Appendix A. A Curriculum For Natural Flourishing**

### **Basic- 13 Sessions**

- Session One- Making an Assessment: naming our losses and claiming our gifts.  
Resource- Finding Meaning, the Sixth Stage of Grief, David Kessler
- Session Two- Grieving Our Losses and Searching for Meaning  
Resource- Finding Meaning, the Sixth Stage of Grief, David Kessler
- Session Three- Gratitude and Gratitude Journal  
Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session One, Session Eight)
- Session Four- Naming our Strengths  
Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session Two)
- Session Five- Forgiveness  
Resource- Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session Six)
- Session Six- Hope and Optimism  
Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session Nine)
- Session Seven- Posttraumatic Growth  
Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session Ten)
- Session Eight- Positive Relationships  
Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session Twelve)
- Session Nine- Positive Communication  
Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session Thirteen)
- Session Ten- Altruism and Service  
Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session Fourteen)
- Session Eleven- Meaning and Purpose  
Resource- Positive Psychotherapy Clinicians Manuel (Session Fifteen)
- Session Twelve- Playfulness  
Resource- PlayFull, Slowing Down and Seeking Peace- Jaco Hamman
- Session Thirteen- Grit  
Resource- Grit, The Power of Passion and Perseverance, Angela Duckworth

### **Level One Advanced- Mindfulness 13 Sessions**

- Resources: Trauma Focused ACT, Russ Harris Exercises throughout the book  
Choose the Life You Want, The Mindful Way to Happiness, Tal Ben-Shahar

Special curriculum groups for differently abled and transgendered and those with addictions or mental illnesses.

**Appendix B. A Curriculum for Spiritual/Religious Flourishing with a Christian Focus**

Resource: *Flourishing on the Edge of Faith*, Andrew DeCort-

Session One- Who is God?, Our Parent

Session Two- How Should We Talk About God? Hallowed

Session Three- What Do You Want? Your Kingdom Come

Session Four- How Much Is Enough? Our Daily Bread

Session Five- How Do We Begin Again? Forgive Us As We Forgive Others

Session Six- Can Violence Save Us? Deliver Us From Evil

Session Seven- Can You Let Go of Power and Prestige? Yours Forever

Resource: *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, Chapter 12 - Jonathan T. Pennington

Session Eight- The Bible is About Human Flourishing

Session Nine-The Bible's Vision of Human Flourishing is God-Centered and Eschatological

Session Ten- The Moral View of the Bible Is a Revelatory Virtue Ethic

Session Eleven- Salvation is Inextricably Entailed with Discipleship/Virtuous Transformation

Session Twelve- Virtue and Grace are Compatible, Not Opposites

Session Thirteen-Biblical Human Flourishing Provides Crucial Insight into the Meaning and Shape of God's Saving Work

### Appendix C. Practices of Lament

In the book, *The Ministry of Lament, Caring for the Bereaved* Gene Fowler holds the process of Psychological Mourning alongside the pattern of Biblical Lament to demonstrate how lament can help with the work of mourning.

#### Psychological Mourning

1. Recognize the Loss
2. React to the Separation
3. Recollect and Reexperience the Deceased and the Relationship
4. Relinquish the Old Attachments To the Deceased and the Old Assumptive World
5. Readjust to Move Adaptively into The New World without Forgetting the Old
6. Reinvest

#### Biblical Lament

1. Address to God
2. Complaint
3. Confession of Trust
4. Petition
5. Words of Assurance
6. Vow of Praise and Thanksgiving

#### Learning to Lament Worksheet

Mark Vroegop- *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*-Appendix 3

#### Movements of Lament

1. Turn to God  
Address God as you come to him in prayer
2. Bring Your Complaint  
Identify in blunt language the specific Pain or injustice.
3. Ask Boldly  
Specifically, call upon God to act in a manner That fits His character and resolves your complaint.
4. Choose to Trust  
Affirm God's worthiness to be trusted, and commit To praise Him.

#### Psalms of Lament

Mark Vroegop- *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*-Appendix 2

Personal- 3,4,5,7,10,13,17,22,25,26,28,31,39,42,43,54,55,56,57,59,61,70,71,77,86,120,141,142.

Corporate- 12,44,58,60,74,79,80,83,85,90,94,123,126.

Repentant- 6,32,38,51,102,130,143.

Imprecatory (Justice)- 35,69,83,88,109,137,140.

## Appendix D. Interfaith Theologies of Flourishing and Suffering

### Jewish Flourishing

Moses Maimonides made this claim in his Guide for the Perplexed when he says the whole of the Torah “aims at two things: the wellness of the soul and the wellness of the body<sup>161</sup>,” He goes on to say, “When keeping the body in health and vigor, one walks in the way of God ... it is a person’s duty to avoid whatever is injurious to the body and cultivate habits conducive to health and vigor.”<sup>162</sup> Rabbi Ben Spratt states, “The purpose of Judaism is fulfillment and flourishing, personally and globally.”<sup>163</sup> “Human flourishing is growing, thriving, and doing well,” says Rabbi Irwin Kula.

What does it mean for life to go well in Judaism? For Maimonides, flourishing comes through the life of the mind/understanding. Life is political, and lived among other people, and the commandments are the way to govern the community so that, together, there is true flourishing for everyone. The focus on the (teleological) goal of the law asks, “Does it lead to human flourishing?”<sup>164</sup>

In Judaism, the question of what is a flourishing life has different answers. There is a current project being conducted by The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, called The Flourishing Project, whose purpose is “to reimagine how we can use Jewish wisdom

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<sup>161</sup> Rabbi Ben Spratt <https://kenissa.org/2020/04/a-judaism-for-flourishing/>.

<sup>162</sup> Moses Maimonides, Mishnah Torah, Rabbi Rick Schechter, <https://www.reformjudaism.org/jewish-perspectives-health-wellness/what-jewish-tradition-says-about-health-and-wellness> -

<sup>163</sup> Spratt. <https://kenissa.org/2020/04/a-judaism-for-flourishing/>

<sup>164</sup> Dr. Yonatan Brafman

Presentation: MITZVOT AND THE PATH TO HUMAN FLOURISHING, <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/mitzvot-and-the-path-to-human-flourishing/> (Last accessed February 17, 2024).

and practice to deepen each individual's personal character strengths towards greater human flourishing."<sup>165</sup>

Jewish conservative writer Dennis Prager calls happiness a moral obligation for religious people. He argues that people who are unhappy poorly represent their religious faith and do damage to their cause. No one likes to be around people who are unusually unhappy, so we owe it to others not to be overly unhappy."<sup>166</sup>

### **Islamic Flourishing**

Falah (translated success) is "a comprehensive state of spiritual, moral, cultural, political and socio-economic well-being in this world, and success in the Hereafter."<sup>167</sup> The Islamic faith has "Five dimensions of well-being are together known as the Maqasid (Objectives) of Islamic ethics and law. They are faith, life, intellect, posterity, and wealth."<sup>168</sup>

Many of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed speak about well-being. He states, "You will not enter Paradise until you attain to faith, and you will not attain to faith until you love one another. Shall I tell you of a thing to do that will make you love one another? Spread peace among yourselves."<sup>169</sup>

One strand of Islamic teaching stresses a kind of divine providence. Everything comes from God and happens for a reason, for our benefit. Al-Ghazali says, "Everything which God Most High distributes among His servants- care and an appointed time, happiness and sadness,

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<sup>165</sup> <https://www.clal.org/project/flourishing-project/>

<sup>166</sup> Dennis Prager, *Happiness is a Serious Problem*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 3-4.

<sup>167</sup> *An Islamic Perspective on Human Development*, Published by Islamic Relief Worldwide, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>168</sup> *An Islamic Perspective*, Islamic Relief

<sup>169</sup> Charles Le Gai Eaton, ed., *The Book of Hadith, Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, from the Miskat al-Masabih*, (Watsonville, CA: The Book Foundation, 2008), 98-99.

weakness and power, faith and unbelief, obedience and apostasy, all of it is unqualifiedly just with no injustice in it, true with no wrong infecting it.”<sup>170</sup>

Muhammed U. Faruque says, “People whose self-conception involves the idea of self-transcendence, and whose life is immersed in practices such as spiritual exercises geared toward a realization of the sacred and the oneness of humanity...tend to feel happier and have a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.”<sup>171</sup>

### **Buddhist Flourishing**

Buddha’s Four Noble Truths include the following: 1. The reality and pervasiveness of suffering. 2. The Source or cause of suffering. 3. The means to ending suffering. 4. The path to achieving this freedom from suffering. Volf states, “All suffering... arises from ‘craving’. The goal is to stop being the type of person who experiences craving or desire through non-attachment.”<sup>172</sup> The first step on the Eightfold Path of Enlightenment is “a permanent and complete end to craving, aversion, ignorance, and attachment.”<sup>173</sup> It should be noted that Buddhist teaching has been incorporated into positive psychology, particularly in the mindfulness practices utilized by many types of cognitive behavioral therapy including ACT.

### **Summary**

While there are many differences among different religions, it can be noted that all of the major religions recognize flourishing, meaning, and hope as important elements of their focus. Flourishing may be described in different ways, but it remains a nearly universal element of religion.

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<sup>170</sup> Volf, *Life Worth Living*, 192.

<sup>171</sup> Muhammed U. Faruque, *Sculpting the Self. Islam, Selfhood and Human Flourishing*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2021), 240.

<sup>172</sup> Volf, *Life Worth Living*, 189-190.

<sup>173</sup> Seth Zuiho Segall, *Buddhism and Human Flourishing, A Modern Western Perspective* (Cham Switzerland: Palgrave macmillan, 2020), 25.

### **Appendix E. Spiritual Assessment, Which Incorporates Flourishing**

A spiritual assessment that gives space to explore flourishing could include the following:

1. What would a really good day look like for you?
2. What three things give you the greatest sense of meaning and purpose in your life?
3. Describe a time when you felt really happy.
4. What makes you laugh?
5. To whom do you turn first when you are having a bad day?
6. What is an activity where you find yourself so fully engaged that you lose track of time?
7. What is one thing that you hope your loved ones will say about you after you have died?
8. Describe a recent time when you felt very sad, can you recall what events led up to it and how you processed that sadness?
9. Can you name a time when you were knocked down by life and were able to get back up again? What helped you the most?
10. How often do you play and who do you play with?
11. Can you name your three closest friends?
12. What's the one thing on your bucket list that you would most like to do?
13. If God promised to answer one of your prayers what would you pray for?
14. What is something you regret?
15. Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to forgive you?
16. What is your greatest hope in life?

## Appendix F. Ignatius' First Principle and Foundation

PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION of St Ignatius of Loyola

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.

And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created.

From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it.

For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup>Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola/ First Week/ Principle and Foundation.pdf*



## Appendix G. Flourishing and the Philosophers

Flourishing has long been a subject of interest in philosophy. Historically, the two main approaches to happiness or flourishing are hedonic and *eudaimonic*. In the hedonic approach to flourishing, the main goal is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.<sup>175</sup> One of the notable hedonic philosophers was Epicurus. The greatest marker of this is one's felt experience of pleasure and avoidance of suffering. In the Eudaimonic approach made popular by Aristotle<sup>176</sup>, the goal of flourishing or well-being is living a good life or a life of excellence characterized by following a virtuous path of life.<sup>177</sup>

Another approach to flourishing came from Zeno and the philosophy of the Stoics which locates happiness or well-being in one's ability to detach from unhealthy emotions.<sup>178</sup> Robertson states, "The stoics used reason and psychological exercises to overcome unhealthy desires and emotions, making way for healthy ones."<sup>179</sup> Each of these approaches to well-being has been taken up by or adapted to contemporary philosophical, psychological, and spiritual attempts to define flourishing. Hedonism lives on in utilitarian ethics, *eudaimonia* lives on in Virtue Ethics, and Stoicism has become popular in some circles as well.

Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Adler taught. Instead, life is a quest for meaning. The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing

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<sup>175</sup> Christopher P. Niemiec and Richard M. Ryan, *What Makes For A Life Well Lived? Autonomy and Its Relation to Full Functioning and Organismic Wellness*, Chapter 16 in Susan A. David, Ilona Boniwell, Amanda Conley Ayers, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 216.

<sup>176</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>177</sup> Niemiec and Ryan, *What Makes for a Life well Lived?* Oxford Handbook of Happiness, 216.

<sup>178</sup> Joar Vitters, *Introduction to Psychological Definitions of Happiness*, Chapter 11 in David, Boniwell, Ayers, Oxford, 155.

<sup>179</sup> Donald Robertson, *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness, Practical Wisdom for Everyday Life*, (UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 2013), 21.

something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning in how we respond to it.”<sup>180</sup>

Frankl states, “Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you.”<sup>181</sup>”

He goes on, “Logotherapy deviates from psychoanalysis insofar as it considers man a being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning, rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts, or in merely reconciling the conflicting claims of id, ego and superego, or in the mere adaptation and adjustment to society and environment.”<sup>182</sup>

Some stress that it is important to differentiate meaning from happiness as they relate to flourishing. Van Tongeren describes, “Cultivating meaning now can better prepare people for adversity or suffering again in the future. This research provides powerful evidence that meaning, rather than happiness, is an important component in a flourishing life.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (Beacon Press. Kindle Edition). Forward by Rabbi Harold Kushner

<sup>181</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search*.

<sup>182</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search*, 103.

<sup>183</sup> Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Sara A. Showalter Van Tongeren, *The Courage to Suffer, Spirituality and Mental Health*, (Templeton Press. Kindle Edition).

**Appendix H. A First Person Narrative from a Person Who is  
Flourishing after Multiple Losses**

**Author: Anonymous Young Woman**

I remember leaving to go on a beginning-of-the-summer beach trip, nestled between the luggage of 5 people and the window in the very back of a van. Is there anywhere else that the youngest would sit? As the baby girl with 2 older brothers, I often was left to my own devices, trying - and failing - to insert myself into whatever my brothers were doing.

On that day, they were caught up in a conversation of their greatest fears. We grew up on a steady diet of Scooby Doo, Dragon Ball Z, and dubbed-over Godzilla movies, so they had several choices to pick from. They never bothered to ask me, but I still gazed out the window and imagined what my worst fear would be. Leaving home for a few days, I began to mull over the options of the terrible events that could happen to all my possessions... or worse yet, my animals. Earthquakes, tornadoes, house fires. In the middle of this, my parents finally walked out the door with the final tasks done, and as they got in the car, I remember thinking to myself, "No, my worst fear would be my parents dying."

A few years later, another boy at my church asked me the same thing. Only this time, I knew what my response would be. And, I thought to myself without saying it out loud, I already lived it.

My childhood was an idyllic 90's dream. My mom was able to stay home with me and my brothers. My dad was well off. We never lacked anything. We had a lovely church family, lots of friends, and attended good schools. I was that special kind of studious, rule-following, quiet girl who excelled at and enjoyed school.

In 2004, we rushed to get our house on the market so that my parents could build their dream home in a beautiful new neighborhood across town. In a flurry, we scrubbed floors, painted walls, and packed everything in storage. We moved into my dad's mother's house for the next year while the new house was built. (This turned out to be perfect timing with the housing crisis right around the corner.)

Over Christmas break in 2004, my cousins and I were busy running loops around my grandmother's house, playing whatever game hit our minds. My mom's mother's house was always the hub of family get-togethers. She had been battling a muscular degeneration disease for years and was wheelchair-bound. She couldn't bend her fingers, but she still entertained us and made us laugh as we looked at all the treasures she had stored away in her cupboards.

The adults would congregate in the 80's style kitchen and visit. On this day, I looked over at my mom, who seemed to double-over in pain, leaning on the counter and describing something to my aunts and uncles. Little did I know that pain would determine the course of her life and my life.

She went to the doctor a few weeks later and they found a malignant tumor that was progressing quickly. Ovarian cancer. I guess it shouldn't really have been a surprise. Her mother - my maternal grandmother - was a breast cancer survivor.

She went through rounds of chemotherapy. Her hair fell out in the shower. I remember the day after school when we had to go get her specially made wig at a place near the grocery store in our town. People would come up to her and tell her that her hair would grow by thicker and more luscious once all this was behind her. The first round of chemo didn't work, and by summer, they tried radiation. It was harder for my mom to get around, but there was little blessings along the way.

She had been what others called ‘wide open’ - a firecracker ready for anything. A story that sums up her personality is one from her childhood. When she was a teenager, her mom got them a four-wheeler for their farm. She wanted to ride it first thing, and so she hopped on and stepped on the gas. The four-wheeler shot out... and went straight into the bushes. Afterward, they asked her why she didn’t stop beforehand. She said, “I didn’t know how to turn on the brakes!”

Cancer brought her low, but it didn’t snuff out her spirit. After radiation, she went dancing through the house when they told her the cancer was gone. But then, it came back with a vengeance in the fall.

The stress of building the house had been catching up with my dad. He used a friend of the family to build the house, but there were hold-ups and some shady business. My dad, who never yelled, was at his breaking point, one day shouting on the phone to his friend, “You need to handle this!” We finally moved into the house in September.

During this time, it seemed like time was punctuated with those dinner table conversations when they told us that her time was growing shorter and shorter. In October, my dad - my mom’s soulmate and high school sweetheart - sat us down and said that she only had a few months to live. She looked over at us, weakened in a wheelchair, and I didn’t know what to do. Should I cry? Would that make her cry? Should I comfort her? But, she was comforting me.

My grandmother got sicker, and my aunt, who had been her caretaker for years as she became wheelchair-bound, was struggling. My dad had to have surgery to have his gallbladder removed. My grandmother was now bedridden. My mother had restarted those long chemo treatments. And there was us. My two teenage brothers were doing teenage boy things, complete with girls, breaking curfew, loud music, and rowdy friends. And, me, that quiet girl of 10.

As I said, there were special blessings. One of my closest friends' family had an open-door policy as far as I was concerned. I spent a lot of time at their house during that year. The church rallied around us. We ate lasagna delivered by someone from the church for months and months. A woman that we knew through a friend of a friend stepped in and helped to care for my grandmother.

In December, they sat us around the kitchen table and told us that my mom wasn't doing good. Instead of a matter of months, they said that they would probably only have a matter of weeks. She spent that Christmas in hospice and passed away on Dec. 28th.

Even now, I view that time as a blur. A time of going through the motions. The funeral had so many people - lined out the door for visitation. After the fact, there were meals. People offered to drive us around and take care of us. I felt the love and support of a wide group of people who were looking out for us. Hospice sat us down to try to talk to me and my brothers about our feelings. Extended family members were ever watchful of how we were doing.

I had barely processed what had happened when my dad said a phrase that clued me into another tragedy. He looked at me and said, "Mema's not doing too well." My 10-year-old brain heightened with everything that happened. I wrote in my journal, "He said this before. I think I know what's going to happen."

During MLK Day weekend, my grandmother went into a coma. She woke up on Sunday to a house full of people who were there to pay their last respects. We came by her bedside, and she grabbed our hands, looked us in the eye, and said, "I want to see you in the kingdom." I went over to my friend's house that night. That Monday morning, my dad and aunt came by and told me that my grandmother had passed away.

A few more weeks passed. My dad and aunt tried to go through the process of grieving. The cleaning out of not just one but two sets of clothes and belongings. The figuring out of drop-offs and pick-ups (I rode the bus that year). The homework. My grades had gone down. It turns out that I needed glasses, but I was too quiet to let anyone know that the trees and the letters on the board in the front of the room (I was always put in the back) were a blur.

One night at the beginning of February, my dad was getting dressed to go play basketball with the church league. He asked me if I needed him to stay home to help with homework. I said I'm fine. That morning, he didn't come get us up. I woke up and had a passing thought that maybe it was a snow day. When the light finally clicked on, my heart dropped. My aunt came and sat on my bed. With tears in her eyes, she said, "It stinks when you know more people in the kingdom than in real life." She then told me that my dad had a heart attack during the basketball game. They had taken my older brother to the hospital, but let me and my other brother sleep. They just couldn't get his heart restarted.

By this point, I knew the sermon my pastor was going to preach. I knew the ins and outs of the funeral service. I was out of school for three days. My classmates wrote cards where they wrote about how they knew how I felt because they had a pet or a grandparent who died.

I didn't write in my journals these days. In the next few entries, I focused on friendships and boys. I think I had basically compartmentalized what happened. I never talked to anyone about what had happened. There was a part of me who I didn't let other people see - the orphan girl. I chose to focus on what I could control, the boys and the drama. That was the focus of my conversations, my journal entries. Still, every morning in the shower as I got ready for the day, I would tell my story in my head - the same one you're reading now.

My mother's sister and her husband agreed to move with us, in the house my parents had built, and became our legal guardians. In the fall of 2006, my aunt went in for a regular check-up. She also had a spot they were worried about. The doctor, the same doctor who had taken care of my mom, advised that she had a full hysterectomy. There was a month-long period of surgery, testing, recovering, and waiting. Finally, we could breathe a sigh of relief: The spot turned out to be non-cancerous.

There was a song that was popular around this time called, "Jesus bring the rain." I remember getting down on my hands and knees saying, Jesus, I can't take any more rain. My heart felt heavy, like a pit in the bottom of my stomach. One day, I remember listening to a song, a worship song, and it physically hurt as I tried to seek joy, seek the positive.

My middle school years were hard. There were the normal things: Puberty, self-consciousness, weight gain, and growth. In addition to this, I continued the ritual of telling my story every morning for about three years. These were those years in the late 2000s when being 'goth' and 'emo' was cool and somewhat normal. People wrote on their Myspaces about cutting themselves. And, I knew a few girls who actually did that. It was only my fear of the actual pain that kept me from doing that.

I was in a dark place.

And, yet, there is always light.

As I grew up, I faced the choice that we all do. Do we accept the faith of our parents and make it our own? Or do we choose to reject it? God was always close to me - shown to me through the acts of everyone who loved on me and helped me through the deaths of my parents. My aunt was very devout and continued to cling to God through everything. Their examples paved the way for me.



As I wrestled with that decision, I started to turn to God. As I turned to him, I was able to pull myself out of that dark place. In 2009, I began to read my Bible regularly. My friends and I would have long talks about the purpose we felt God had for our lives. When I put my life in terms of God's purposes for me, the idea of harming myself, whether through actual blades or the prevalent drugs that existed in the schools, drifted away. I began to realize that every action has an impact.

I graduated high school and went to college. During my first week at college, one of the ladies who had been close to my mom called me. She wanted to invite me over to a night where she and a few friends to tell stories about my mom. She told me, "I want you to know whose child you are." After being raised by my aunt for 8 years at that point, I didn't really know how she wanted me to respond. I realized that I had somehow stopped defining my life through the people that I lost.

Yes, I will always love my parents. I will desire to know more about them. To know them through the stories and pictures of others, glimpses of people who made me me who I only really just started getting to know in my 10 short years. But, I realized the blessing that I had: To have 2 loving parents (and two sets of loving grandparents) who loved God and me. Who were genuinely good people. Not only that, I was taken care of by another set of godly people. Just recently, my aunt and uncle officially adopted us. They have become my children's nana and papa, loving both me and my children like we are their own.

I had a crossroads in my path, where I could have fixated on the life I had lost. If I had gone down a different path, I could have turned to substances, cutting, or a promiscuous life. I knew of others who used what they went through almost as an excuse. They didn't want to do

the work of changing their actions, of realizing that small actions add up to an entire life, and so, they ended up in a place unrecognizable from the dreams that they had for their lives.

I graduated from college with a 3.94 GPA (Magna Cum Laude with .01 of a point away from Summa Cum Laude). I then graduated with a 4.0 with my master's. I got a job before I graduated teaching high school English and got married. I taught for 5 years before staying home with my 2 kids.

I feel like my life is flourishing despite the tragedy and trauma I experienced. What has led to this flourishing was the strong support system that I had throughout my life and my continual reliance on God. Beginning in high school, I began to practice spiritual disciplines, like prayer, journaling, and bible study as well as time spent studying in fellowship with other believers. I can tell a causal link between times of severe depression related to past traumatic events and times when I have neglected my lifeline. My life is flourishing because of the role that God has in it.

In addition to this, flourishing comes from gratitude, from seeing the blessings in the midst of difficult times. When you view the world and life as a gift, it makes the sweet things sweeter and the difficult storms easier to weather.

I now stay home with my kids. I write on a small blog and host a podcast that considers ways of living an intentional life that has God at the center. My relationship with God has helped me to flourish in the midst of struggles. And, it is helping me flourish in the midst of the beautiful, sanctifying times of watching two kids three and under.

Even through the darkest times, there is light. That light is God who comes to be with us in the form of Jesus, our Savior. Amen and amen.

**Appendix I. A Personal Post-Script. My Ongoing quest for flourishing, hope, and meaning while living with a life-altering cancer diagnosis.**

When I began this project, I was five years post-cancer diagnosis for prostate cancer. After surgery and radiation, the doctor has been doing active surveillance with regular checkups. Cancer was still present but was not showing up on any scans. In the autumn of 2023, that changed when a PET scan revealed metastatic disease in several places in my body. I began hormone deprivation therapy and oral cancer medications to help slow the spread of this hormone-dependent cancer. In February 2024, I was diagnosed with melanoma, which spread into a lymph node. I began immunotherapy with a projected surgery in late spring, 2024. This has given me additional opportunities to live out my project thesis. This is a fully dedicated level of phenomenological research. When I shared this with my spiritual director, Rev. Bill Haley, he humorously chided, “You should have chosen a different topic, like how to cope with great health and prosperity.” His sense of humor well matches mine. As the French mystic Madame Guyon once said, “We should accept all God’s gifts, not just the ones we want.” This is my unwanted gift from God and it is from this that I continue my research into flourishing while suffering and the hopeful meaning making which accompanies it.

I have continued to explore what meaning looks like in my life and how I can live a flourishing life with hope. I continue to serve as a hospital chaplain and pastor, and I do so with a greater awareness of my mortality and limits. I am better able to focus my time and attention on those things that truly matter to me which include spending time with the people I love, doing activities that bring me joy, serving others, and expressing my gratitude to God. I am hopeful that the treatments will significantly delay the progression of the disease. I notice and engage with beauty regularly and choose to travel to places that will reveal beauty to me.

In the fall of 2023, I took a trip with my wife and daughter to England, Ireland, Scotland, France, and Austria. While in Ireland and Scotland visiting beautiful places, I had the experience of seeing rainbows in three different beautiful locations on three consecutive days. Rainbows have always been a sign of hope and promise to me. When I returned home, I brought the experience of the three rainbows to my visit with my Spiritual Director, and we began to explore the potential meaning. He invited me to bring this into my time of prayer with God.

In one instance when I saw the rainbow, the skies had been dark with clouds and rain, and the cold October winds blowing off the Atlantic Ocean along the West Coast of Ireland brought a chill to my bones. As the evening sun descended toward the Atlantic along the famed Cliffs of Moher, the skies began to clear for a brief moment, the light showing through the black sky, and a beautiful rainbow appeared. I came away from my reflection on this event with a deep sense of hope from God. I may go through some times of suffering on this journey, but God is with me. There is beauty everywhere.

I have a goal to live a flourishing life in service to God and other people in love for as long as I am physically able as I live with cancer. My pathway is to continue spending time with the people I love and serving others through chaplaincy, pastoral ministry, writing, and growing more deeply in my union with God. I believe that this project leaves me with greater agency. I feel better equipped than ever before in nearly forty years of ministry to experience flourishing, meaning and hope in my life, and I work to help those who are suffering also to find paths toward flourishing, meaning, and hope in their lives. As I do this, I frequently taste the “sated joy” that Dr. Paul Kalanithi described. No, this is not ultimate flourishing, for there is still pain, suffering, and loss. However, I do experience flourishing, meaning, and hope now as I live with a vision of the ultimate flourishing that awaits.



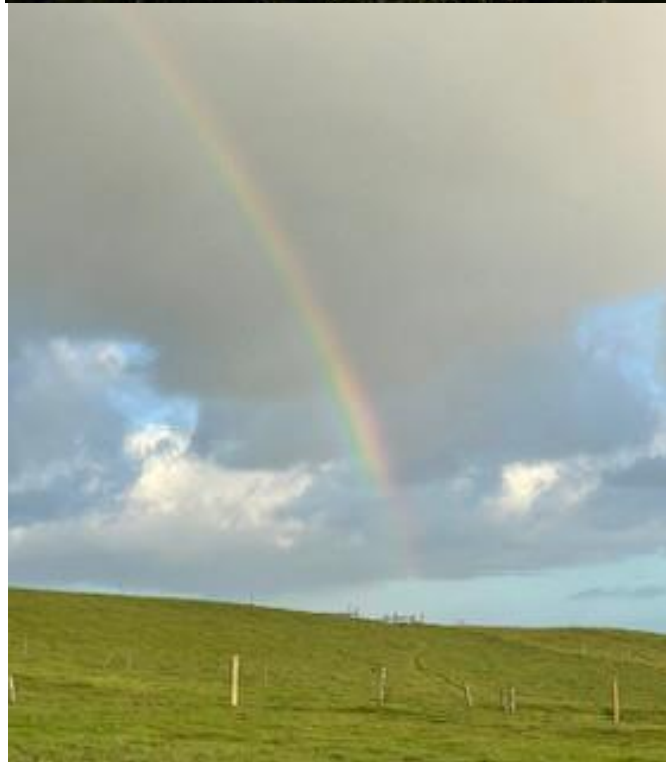
Photograph taken at National Wallace Monument, Sterling, Scotland, UK  
October 2022

Photo Credit: Karen Burnham Fletcher



Photograph Taken at Loch Lomond, Scotland, UK  
October 2022

Photo Credit-J. Jeffrey Fletcher



Photographs taken at Cliffs of Mohrer, County Clare, Ireland  
October 2022  
Photo Credit- J. Jeffrey Fletcher









