



Death by Suburb

[How to keep the suburbs from killing your soul]

Study 4

of an 8 Week Study

The Environmental TOXIN:

MY LIFE SHOULD BE EASIER THAN IT IS

The Spiritual PRACTICE:

ACCEPTING MY CROSS WITH GRACE AND PATIENCE

Introduction

A woman who appeared to be in her late thirties recently said that after she first read the toxin in Chapter 5—"My life should be easier than it is"—she gasped, realizing that part of the anxiety about her life was rooted in a wrong assumption: that her life shouldn't be as hard as it is.

She had a strange illness that surfaced randomly for weeks at a time, stealing her away from being the typical suburban mom of three. From any perspective, her life was hard, period.

Just as it is clear that God does not hand out the same gifts to everyone, it's also clear that each person's measure of suffering is not the same. I get one amount, you get another—no matter how safe your suburb.

The toxin is the notion that suffering should be foreign to us, that life should somehow always move in an upward direction. But that kind of thinking only creates more anxiety, because it's counter to the true nature of life. And it also prevents us from experience the sweetness of life.

—Dave Goetz

Reading the Chapter

This study is based on Chapter 5 of *Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing the Soul*. Chapter 5 explains the toxin as well as the key spiritual practice. Read the chapter before completing the study.

Understanding Your 'Burb

I've got a theory that really can't be proved through a clinical trial or a double-blind study: that the suburbs tend to secret away suffering. That is, much of our lives is taken up with image management—looking good, appearing okay, always excited about the future. The hard parts of life warrant no public relations campaign. Who wants to hear about a hard marriage? Or trying to parent a child with depression? Or feeling caught between your ex-husband and your teenage daughter?



The best explanation I've heard about why we tend to believe that life is all sweetness and light comes from Dr. Gardner Taylor, a black preacher who guided Concord Missionary Baptist Church in the Bronx in the second half of the twentieth century.

He called it the "veil of permanence," which the young experience. At least for many in the First World, those in the first half of life believe that they'll live forever. That may be one reason why teenagers have the highest risk of death by car.

In one sense, we couldn't live well if the first half of life was shrouded in the fear of death (as it is for many in the developing world). The veil of permanence is, really, a gift.

But the veil starts to lift in the second half of life. When does it begin? Perhaps by profound suffering. A fourth child with Down Syndrome. A divorce. Melanoma. A teenage pregnancy. Chronic underemployment.

At some point, life runs out of its ten thousand joys. And then comes the suffering.

1. What are some of the ways your community tends to secret away or to hide suffering?

2. List some of the hard parts of life that you've seen acquaintances and friends endure the last couple years.

- a. A teenage son with chronic depression.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.
- j.



3. Put together a list of areas in your life that have not met your expectation or are, at present, just plain hard. Which of those are intractable (not easily "fixed")?

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

Discovering Biblical Spirituality

I'm a big believer in setting goals, thinking positively, and stretching oneself to reach new personal heights. I have a broody personality, so I have no quarrel with many of the fundamentals of self-help. I need all the help I can get. I've benefited greatly from goal-setting, for example.

Many things in life, though, cannot be fixed by positive thinking or more self-talk. You cannot change, for example, the fact that no matter how buffed and beautiful you are now, when you hit 77, your abs will look a bit different than they did at 17 or 27.

And if you have teenager with severe depression, there are no quick fixes, no matter your access to the best psychologists in the land. There are parts of life you simply can't control. You do what you can, of course, but often there are no "solutions."

The spiritual mystics called one's suffering the "cross." You experience the cross if you feel persecuted for your faith. That's one kind of suffering, which many of us never really experience, given where we have been placed in history. But there's also a general kind of suffering—life itself—which comes in the form of physical ailments, wayward children, difficult marriages, divorce, poverty, loneliness, etc.

1. The Old Testament psalms are filled with angst: The psalmist is in a tight spot, has no where to turn, and then cries out to God. Read Psalm 69 together as a group by taking turns reading sections out loud. How is the psalmist's emotion at the beginning of the psalm different from the end?

What has happened, emotionally, at the end?



2. Francois Fenelon, the 17th century Christian mystic, wrote, "Many think that 'dying to themselves' is what causes them so much pain. But it is actually part of them that still lives that is the problem." His point is that often the pain comes from fighting the suffering itself. We live with a deep anxiety about our cross, as if we can throw it off somehow. The real spiritual journey is to come to live with a deep sense of peace in the midst of suffering, especially when we feel God is silent.

What would be some examples of fighting your cross?

- a. You feel ashamed that one of your children has chucked your Christian values. You fear that you made too many mistakes in raising him or her.
- b. You live with the knowledge that you believe you should have done more to save your first marriage.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.

3. What is the suffering in your life that you are fighting against? What would it take to stop the fighting?

Spiritual Exercises

Often there is a deep fear in what it might mean to stop the fighting. Perhaps it's the fear of the unknown: If I give up on this, what's left? Even the anxiety about our cross can become a source of meaning in life.

To stop fighting our cross is not a "technique" or some "Christian principle" that we



apply to our lives. Often only after great suffering and our crying out to God to release us from what we think our life should be do we find peace. Inner peace often comes only after the "dark night of the soul," to use the familiar Christian phrase. You have to endure the night to see the sunrise.

Group Activity: Initiate a time of silence and reflection. Have group members recall a past time when they felt God was silent during profound suffering. How did the silence shape your understanding of God, of your understanding of the nature of life? What did you learn about yourself? About God? How did you endure the dark night of the soul?

Quote to Live by

"There are two kinds of darkness, an unhappy darkness and a happy darkness. The first darkness is that which arises from sin.... The second kind of darkness is darkness which the Lord allows within our inward part in order establish and settle virtue.... it illuminates your inward spirit, strengthens it and gives it greater light."

—MICHAEL MOLINAS, *THE SPIRITUAL GUIDE*

A Final Word from the writer of Hebrews

"Patient endurance is what you need now, so you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised."

—HEBREWS 10:36 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)