

SURVIVING THE UNTHINKABLE: Choosing to Live after Someone You Love Chooses to Die

Don J. Payne

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An interesting phenomenon has appeared on the internet called "Postsecret." On this website, contributors send in postcards anonymously writing down personal secrets, from the funny ("I'm a girlie-girl who likes to play with power tools . . .") to the tragic ("My husband was arrested by the FBI and my family thinks he's away at a treatment facility"). We all have secrets. Some of them we would never dare tell another person. But some secrets lead to the most ultimate of actions: taking one's own life. How does one respond, moreover, when he or she is a member of one's own family? That is the question of this very personal book by Don J. Payne, Associate Professor of Theology and Christian Formation at Denver Seminary, and a member of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship.

His one basic goal, states Dr. Payne, is "to offer a bit of strength and encouragement to others who are forced to deal with a suicide" (xviii), presented in three parts: 1) giving voice to the unpredictable emotions involved, 2) offering reflections based on the Christian faith, and 3) attempting to point to where hope can be found.

This is not an area in which expertise can readily be appealed to or a club that one wants to join, Payne wryly comments. If it is a club, it is a club of "survivors," for the suicidee leaves behind other victims than himself: his family and his friends. Much of the book rightly deals with this connectedness that we have to one another, a connectedness that we often take for granted (one cannot but help think of "onto-relations" in Torrance's thought).

The individual is left with an intensity in the ordinary - the places where one was when one heard the news become intensified - where ordinary human acts become sacramental, such as drinking a warm cup of coffee. The ordinariness of the relationship between brothers now becomes extremely extraordinary when



that other brother is no longer around. We have to redefine ourselves, Payne contends, without that other.

Yet there is a place for hope and gratitude because of the Christian faith, Payne writes. As a Christian one can find "meaning and severity" strangely together in the same place (xx). There is no finding "meaning" in the tragic event itself. It is difficult enough to understand the offender as "both victim and perpetrator" (p. 5). This is one of the most refreshing aspects of Don Payne's book. It is extremely, almost disarmingly, honest in facing what is involved in a suicide of a family member. And, therefore, he takes the process of Christian forgiveness very seriously and not lightly. Don Payne's study under Ray Anderson, who is notable for his work in integrating T. F. Torrance's theology with ministry, is very evident here and throughout the book.

T. F. Torrance wrote much about Christ taking on fallen nature, in order that the entirety of our humanity might be healed. This includes our "secret" places that can fester and grow malignant, providing the basis for the ultimate act of despair. Perhaps it is a judgment upon the church that a website such as "Postsecret" is needed for people to express the desperation of their darkest secrets. Instead, the church should be a place of transparency, as difficult as that is for pastors and theologians alike, as Don Payne points out, where people can "confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16) and pray together to the One who "always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25), Christ, our High Priest. As a part of that reality, Don Payne's book will be very useful as a gift to anyone who is going through such a loss and is seeking to find hope and gratitude.

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