

Gleaning In The Fields Of Light

By Ken Woodley

Into everyone's life, philosophers and meteorologists have told us, some rain must fall.

Floods and droughts.

The past year has been a series of recurring flash floods. That's the weather report for today. Now we move on to floods and droughts of another kind.

Each of us knows through our own experiences about life's non-meteorological floods and about its droughts. "Some rain must fall" hardly tells the story, despite its figurative truth that life is not without its challenging difficulties and difficult challenges.

There are times of suffering. We've all of us been there and done that. We've all of felt about to drown or die of thirst. "Some rain" sure fell but we needed a lot less or we were desperate for so much more.

Throughout human existence, "meteorologists" have sought to see the sunshine through the rain that falls. No, I am not talking about weather forecasters but, rather, philosophers who delve deeply into the human condition.

Suffering they say breeds character. And, yes, it does—if we endure. If we do not succumb. If we do not give up or give in.

What doesn't kill us, they tell us, makes us stronger. Surely this is true—if we do not allow the wounds, whatever they might be, to swallow us.

Resisting the temptation to give up or give in or allow life's physical and mental aches and pains to dictate the rest of the day, the remainder of the week, or the duration of our lives is not always easy.

In fact, it is frequently quite hard.

None of us has the power to control what happens to us in life and so feeling helpless is often our first response, and a response that seems quite reasonable and logical given the circumstances of our powerlessness over life's hardships.

However, each of us can control how we respond to those hardships. That is something we very much have the ability to direct.

As the Roman emperor, and Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius wrote:

“If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.”

But how do we harness this power and use it to “revoke” that distress?

In today’s Epistle lesson, Paul gives his Roman audience what amounts to a lesson in Judo. That is, using your opponent’s momentum against them. Don’t push back against their onslaught. Instead, take advantage of their onrush to flip them head over heels and then pin them to the mat.

“...But we also boast of our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Instead of complaining, Paul advises, rejoice. That is classic “mental Judo” strategy. And very good advice, if we can wrap our head around the reverse psychology of it all.

In many ways, taking control of how we respond to life’s pain and hardship is very much like climbing a difficult mountain. It takes great endurance to reach the summit. Real character is required. But the further we climb the more hope we kindle inside us that one day we will reach the top.

And, with God’s love as our Sherpa guide, even life’s Mount Everests are within our power to scale. Shadows, by their very nature, are not real. Walking out of them into the light is what’s real.

And the view from the top of that mountain is a glory to behold.