

## **To Grumble or Not To Grumble – That’s the Question**

*Never lose hope in God’s mercy.*

RB 4.74

Ever flail and flail against the wind? Most of us have encountered the relentlessness of a difficult or challenging situation that seems never to end. It could be a situation at home, at work, a relationship, a financial worry, an illness or even living with a person with an addiction or unpredictable mood swings. I wrote in my journal a few days ago, “I’m never going to make it. I feel powerless over this. Where are you, Lord?”

It had been a tough morning. I felt like a crazy woman. I was upset and confess that I did what dear Benedict cautions us against—I grumbled. Ranted would be a more apt description. I stomped around, stewing and murmuring more than I had for a long time. Lifting weights for an hour didn’t help. I was definitely in “violence mode.” Not doing any real physical violence, of course. Yet I was hurting myself and stabbing at my relationship with God whom I had branded as merciless because I could neither control a situation nor rid myself of the angry feelings around not being able to control it. The demons were cheering! “Atta girl, Jane. You deserve to be angry. Go for it!” Add to all this, ill feeling against myself for feeling the way that I did.

At one point in this hellacious morning I got my breakfast and, as is my practice, sat down to read the daily portion of the Rule as organized by the Order of St. Benedict. Benedict has a whole chapter devoted to the practice of humility. The image that he gives is that of a ladder with twelve rungs, each rung representing a particular action of humility. It was June 2 and I had a start when I saw the reading of the day—it was on the fourth step of humility.

“The fourth step of humility is that in this obedience under difficult, unfavorable, or even unjust conditions, our hearts quietly embrace suffering and endure it without weakening or seeking escape.”<sup>1</sup> RB 7.35

Eeee gads! Does God have a sense of humor or, better put, a sense of good timing? I had devised a number of ways not to embrace suffering but to seek escape instead, adjusting my schedule or fleeing, physically or mentally. Benedict writes, quoting Psalm 27, “Be brave of heart and rely on God,” and a little later, “...in all this we overcome because of Christ who so greatly loved us.” (Rom 8:37)

With an unsettled heart I read Joan’s Chittister’s comments for the day on this reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, O.S.B., *The Rule of St. Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York, New York: Crossroads, 1999, 2010), 85.

“It is so easy to say, ‘Let God be the center of your life; do God’s will; see God’s will in the will of others for you.’ It is outrageous to say, even under the best of conditions, that it will be easy.”<sup>2</sup>

Amen to that!

“This is the degree of humility that calls for emotional stability, for holding on when things do not go our way, for withstanding the storms of life rather than having to flail and flail against the wind and, as a result, *lose the opportunity to control ourselves when there is nothing else in life that we can control.*”<sup>3</sup> [The italics are my emphasis.]

Oh boy. This has been part of the problem – the inability to control myself, i.e., to not let angry and destructive thoughts rule me. Here is a reminder of something that I can do—seek to control myself. But how? Sr. Joan writes

“Persist. Persevere. Endure, Benedict says...find God where God is not expected to be.”<sup>4</sup>

Full of questions rather than full of acceptance of all this wisdom, I asked, “What does it look like to endure, persist, persevere? What does it look like in this situation? How can I preserve to the end?” No answers then, but, surprisingly, the rest of the day went much better and some sense of calm was restored as I did some work, had lunch with my husband, did errands, had a good conversation with my best friend over the fourth step of humility, etc. Sometimes all we can do is as Sr. Peg my old spiritual director would say, “Change the channel!”

When I went to bed, I prayed that tomorrow God would give me a peaceful heart. I awoke thinking, “A peaceful heart.” Early morning reminders came through Psalm 85, from the Episcopal Daily Lectionary readings.

“Let me hear what God the Lord will speak  
for he will speak peace to his people.  
to his faithful,  
to those who turn to him in their hearts.”

Ps 85:8

Then while exercising another thought came in this quest for the practice of endurance instead of grumbling. The morning was gorgeous, cool and breezy, and I was out doing my intervals – walk, run, sprint (more like walk, trot, trot faster) – and this idea came.

On the in-breath, think or say – “Breathe in peace”  
On the out-breath – “Breathe out the thoughts that destroy me”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 88.

And so as I walked and trotted along, this is what I did. And as I write, I continue this practice. What the result will be I don't know. But once again I was reminded of something that Esther de Waal said in her commentary on this passage—"Only dependence on God can see me through this."<sup>5</sup> To this I would add that how God's help may not look like what we think the help should look like. Perhaps these difficulties and challenges, and the suffering that we may encounter, are opportunities for us to witness to the Lord whom we follow.

"It is the knowledge of Christ crucified, the example of Christ on the cross, that is at the heart of Benedict's asceticism here. It is the daily perseverance in all the trials and difficulties of my life that conforms me to the example of Christ as he suffers on the cross...it is the quiet heart of the opening verse [quoted above] to which I return as I try to make this fourth step into a prayer that I may have the strength and the courage to hold on quietly and in patience...Listening to the voice of Christ, I realize that what I am being asked to do here is simply to fulfill the law of love, which is where in the end everything in Benedict's rule of life is leading me."<sup>6</sup>

Know that God holds you close in the times of challenge, in the places of relentless difficulty, and with every breath you take.

Jane

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### **Links Related to the Article**

To read the entire fourth step of humility in the Rule of St. Benedict, [click here](#).

To read about or order a book mentioned in the article, click on the book title desired.

Joan Chittister O.S.B. [The Rule of St. Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century](#)

Esther de Waal. [A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict](#)

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<sup>5</sup> Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 63.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## A Tool for Moving Through the Challenges of Life

**Purpose of the Tool:** To help you move towards freedom and peace of heart.

**Background on the Tool:** In the fourth step of humility Benedict offers a way to meet and move through the difficult times in life. Instead of letting our negative thoughts control us and lead us into more destructive thinking, we can discover ways to persevere and endure.

**The Tool:** Here are some questions for reflection.

- Bring a difficult situation to mind. We all have them. What are your thoughts about the situation? How does it impact your life?
- As you say, “I will persist, persevere, endure this” what thoughts surface for you? For me it can be, “Grrrr. I don’t want to endure.” Acknowledge and gently accept how you feel.
- Identify some ways that you can care for yourself in the midst of this situation. What do you enjoy doing? How can you carve out some time for this? Is there something that you need to ask for that will help?
- What might you be experiencing or learning that you can share with others to help them in their difficult situations?
- Is there a verse of scripture or other writing that could remind you of God’s presence?
- What might you need to let go of to be at peace within this situation?

Remember what Benedict says—“Place your hope in God alone.” RB 4.41

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