

FIVE STEPS
TO
FACING SUFFERING



Steps

About the **5** Steps Series

The books in the **5** Steps Series are useful for anyone seeking bridge-building solutions to current issues. The **5** Steps series presents positive approaches for engaging with the problems that open up gaps and divisions in family, school, church, and society. Each volume presents five short chapters (or “steps”) on a single topic. Each chapter includes a relevant “excerpt” from a prominent writer, “insights” from the author, and an “example” to consider. The “example” is a real-life story that illustrates how each step can be applied in daily life.

FIVE STEPS TO FACING SUFFERING

Insights and Examples

Geraldine Guadagno



New City Press
of the Focolare
Hyde Park, New York

Published in the United States by New City Press
202 Comforter Blvd., Hyde Park, NY 12538
www.newcitypress.com
©2014 Geraldine Guadagno

Cover design by Leandro de Leon

Real-life Stories printed with permission from various issues of *Living City Magazine*.

A catalog record is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-1-56548-502-0

Printed in the United States of America

*In loving memory
of my mother,
Pauline.*

*Her suffering
was not in vain.*

Contents

Introduction.....	9
-------------------	---

Step 1

Facing the “Why”.....	13
Excerpt: Dennis J. Billy, C.Ss.R.— “Giving Suffering New Meaning”.....	14
Example: <i>A Barrier-Free World</i>	18

Step 2

Recognizing the Presence of Jesus in Suffering.....	23
Excerpt: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Edith Stein—“Cooperating with Christ” ..	24
Example: <i>Jobless in Texas</i>	27
Example: <i>Illness, Fear and Love</i>	29

Step 3

Living the Present Moment	31
Excerpt: Thomas Merton and Mahatma Gandhi— “Accepting Suffering in the Present”	32
Example: <i>I Want What You Want</i>	35

Step 4

Embracing Jesus Crucified and Forsaken	39
Excerpt: John Paul II — “The Depth of the Mystery”	40
Example: <i>Competing Deadlines</i>	44
Example: <i>Unconditional Love for My Daughter</i>	45

Step 5

Going beyond Suffering toward Unity with Our Neighbor.....	49
Excerpt: Chiara Lubich — “The Way to Love Our Neighbor”	50
Example: <i>An Enduring Love</i>	55
Notes.....	59
Further Reading	61

Introduction

ON THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY of my father's death, a doctor told me — as gently as he could — that my mother had six months to live. I staggered out of the hospital room like I had been hit with a hammer. Although I was in my early forties and married, it struck me that I was also an only child and about to be orphaned. Hours later, when the shock wore off, I broke down. I never showed my fear or sorrow to my mom, who was prone to anxiety attacks. I wanted to keep her spirits up for as long as I could. So while I helped care for her, I also spent time sharing activities that she could still enjoy, even if it was just watching a “classic” TV comedy. I arranged visits from relatives, friends and a clergyman known for his sense of humor almost as much as his charity. Inwardly and privately, however, I offered my worries and heartache to God. I knew that compared to the trials of many others, mine were very small. And yet, I suffered.

It can strike anyone, anywhere, at any time. It can assume many guises: the death of a loved one or the loss of a job, illness or accident, separation or divorce, a natural disaster affecting millions or a lone gunman affecting dozens. We think that we are strong, and we might be. But even something tiny—like a paper cut—can make us suffer. Suffering, like joy, is part of the human condition. We see and hear reports of tragedies from all over the world every day. Whether those events affect us directly or not, we cannot help being moved. Unlike joy, people try to avoid suffering as much as possible. Think of how medical science has developed a cornucopia of drugs to ease all kinds of ailments. We even have prescriptions that can ease empathy-induced sadness and anxiety.

How do we make sense of suffering? How can we best respond to it? Should we fight it? Ignore it? Wish it away? Maybe we could try to give it meaning and even turn it into something positive. This book aims to do just that—give meaning to suffering and transform it into something beneficial, perform a sort of spiritual alchemy.

Suffering has been and will always be a mystery. Mysteries cannot be solved by logic; they lie beyond the intellectual and the physical. Simplistic answers will not do, and I will not offer any. But the steps outlined here do attempt to provide a response to suffering that

has proven meaningful in the lives of countless people from varied backgrounds, religious or not.

Although my response stems from Christianity, it also resonates and connects with others developed over centuries within other major religions, and by philosophers or secular thinkers. “All of the world’s great religions have found it necessary to address the problem of evil in their most fundamental writings,” states the *Dictionary of Bible and Religion*. And further, “In principle, the concept of evil and its close relation, creaturely suffering, would not be problematical were there no concept of good.”¹

In a way, religions, philosophies, even humanism have a common point of intersection: “good,” specifically doing good toward others, often by virtue of compassion—which means etymologically “to suffer *with*”—and amid our own sufferings. Buddhism teaches empathy and unconditional love for suffering persons; the one who has transcended suffering needs to help others do the same. Many Hindus believe that suffering is punishment for misdeeds committed in this lifetime or past lives, and so can be remediated by performing good deeds. Many Muslims believe that a suffering neighbor is a test of one’s own charity (love) and faith. Judaism also calls for compassionate responses and deeds toward the suffering in an effort to create a better world. Christians, too, are called to love; Jesus gave a new commandment, which

he called his own: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). Whom are they called to love? Matthew’s Gospel provides a list of sorts: the hungry, thirsty, or naked, the stranger and the prisoner; in other words, those who suffer (see 25:34-40).

Judeo-Christian tradition and scriptures make it clear that God, who is all-good, did not create suffering or death for Adam and Eve, nor for humanity. In Romans, Chapter 5, Paul says that death entered the world through the sin of one man (Adam). But, God loved us so much that he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to save us from sin. Of course, suffering still exists. How then, today, can we deal with suffering—our own, someone else’s and that of the world—with integrity, faithfulness, courage, hope, and maturity? That is what the following pages will explore.

The steps along this journey are (1) facing the “Why”; (2) recognizing the presence of Jesus in suffering; (3) living the present moment; (4) embracing Jesus crucified and forsaken; and (5) going beyond suffering toward unity with our neighbor. A real-life story or two will follow the discussion of each step. In these stories, people like ourselves share how they have grappled with suffering and still do, but have found meaning and transformation walking the Five Steps to Facing Suffering.

Steps

Step 1

Facing the “Why”

Giving Suffering New Meaning

Suffering touches everyone. It is part of the human condition, one of the realities of life... Dealing with suffering is the heart of the matter. On the most basic level, one that touches every aspect of our lives, each person must decide if suffering has meaning... Sometimes the suffering in the world is so overwhelming that it leaves us speechless.

Christian faith affirms that God has not remained silent before the ravages of human suffering. In the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God himself became flesh, becoming like us in all things but sin (Heb 4:15). In his embrace of the cross he experienced the depth of suffering, giving it new meaning through the power of his selfless love.

Dennis J. Billy, C.Ss.R²