



*Hello to Here:
Permitting Suffering to Become a Catalyst
for Authentic Engagement with God*

by **Beth A. Booram**

As I scanned the yard, noticing all of my adult kids and grandkids playing, talking, and enjoying a meal together, it had every appearance of a normal Father's Day celebration. All except one striking element. A small, bare head.

There she was, our darling eight-year-old granddaughter, Harper, jumping on the trampoline with her siblings and cousins, having taken off her turban because she was hot.

If you were given a snapshot of this scene, you, too, would have known instantly—instinctively—that the little girl in the picture had cancer and was receiving chemotherapy. And like me, you may have had to wipe away a tear or gulp back a sob as you took in that reality.

Cancer is but one of the many sources of suffering in our world. It's impossible to live very long without encountering some form of it, cancer or otherwise. Sometimes the suffering is deeply personal, an individual experience that may not be as obvious as a bare head. At other times we suffer for someone we love deeply—someone whose suffering we'd do anything to relieve.

Not long after Harper was diagnosed with leukemia, I read a few lines that cut through the fog of my grief from a book called *[In the Shelter](#)*, by Pádraig O' Tuama. In his book, he repeatedly used the phrase, "Hello to here." as a way of naming the reality of his life, and to help him locate the best place from which to pray. I was drawn to these lines, and, over time, they became my mantra, permitting suffering to become a catalyst for authentic engagement with God.

"Where is it that we are when we pray? We are, obviously in the place where we are. However, we are often in many places. We are saying to ourselves, 'I should be somewhere else' or 'I should be someone else' or 'I'm not where I say I am.' In prayer, to begin where you are not is a poor beginning. To begin where you are may take courage or compromise, or painful truth telling. Whatever it takes, it's wise to begin there."

"In prayer, to begin where you are not is a poor beginning." How often do I think I need to be somewhere else, or be someone else *before* I can pray? This sentence has provoked a lot of honest, real prayer over the past few months. Here are some of the "here's" I've named.



Hello to Not Knowing.

Whenever we suffer, there's always someone else suffering more. In my case, this diagnosis is much more painful and intense for our son and daughter-in-law, and ultimately the most difficult for Harper. However, I've come to terms with the fact that my suffering is unique and particular as a grandparent.

One of the surprising ways that I suffer is from lack of proximity and information. I don't live with Harper and her brothers and parents, so I don't get to see her each day. I don't get to ask, "How are you doing?" "Are you okay?" I'm not the first to know the results from her tests, how she's handling chemo, or what her moods have been like. And there's a particular suffering that comes from caring deeply for someone, and not being able to connect with or get firsthand information about her or him. I suffer in the "not knowing."

Initially, when I noticed myself struggling with this, I chided myself. After all, this isn't about me! And then a more gentle voice intervened, inviting me to accept the unique way that *I* suffer. This is my particular "here," and I'm discovering that it's a verdant place to begin my prayer. Hello to "not knowing."

Hello to Noticing My Body.

As we lived through the first weeks of this devastating news, my husband, David, and I both noticed how hard it was to breathe. It felt like a heavy weight lay across my chest, crushing my lungs, making it difficult to take in air.

One day as I was praying and observing the weight, it came to me: I have a heavy heart—of course it's hard to breathe! My heart is water-logged with sorrow. My body is talking to me, signaling to me that I'm grieving, inviting me to grieve well.

Having read about the vital connection between the body and our spiritual life, I began to attend to my breath. I remembered from [*The Body Keeps the Score*](#) that focusing especially on the out breath activates the parasympathetic nervous system that enables us to relax. So I started to inhale and exhale long, conscious breaths that helped me calm down, settle in, and engage with God in prayer. In contemplative spirituality this is called [breath prayer](#). Hello to noticing my body.



Hello to Helplessness.

If you've ever suffered, you know that one of the most agonizing features is the feeling of helplessness. Helpless to help. Helpless to change things. Helpless to find a solution or provide a remedy to sooth the suffering.

How many times have I thought, "I wish that cancer would have visited me, not our precious girl, not our Harper!" Yet this is a situation where I have no choice. I simply have to consent to the helplessness. This is hard for me.

In the morning, before we got "the call" that Brandt and Laura were headed to the hospital with Harper, I had read the lectionary psalm and made a note in my journal. Psalm 30: 6 "When I was prosperous, I said, 'Nothing can stop me now!'" Isn't that the way it is? When everything is going well (prosperous), I become deluded and think I'm invincible. A few hours later, I was stripped of this delusion, crying out to God in desperation. Hello to helplessness.

Hello to the Mystery of Prayer!

In the early days of Harper's hospitalization, I found it so hard to pray. The best I could do was cry out, "Oh, God! Oh, God!" I count that as prayer, maybe the most important prayer of all. Yet I was grateful to those who could find words to pray, and who prayed for us. My friend, Melodie, at regular intervals, would text me prayers that gave words to my mute heart.

Eventually, David and I stumbled upon something perhaps better than words to help us pray. We were gifted a vision through a novel called [Overstory](#), by Richard Powers, a fascinating novel about trees. We learned that in a forest, established, healthy trees will send nutrients through subterranean networks of root and mycorrhizal fungi to struggling and diseased trees who needed help.

This image began to inspire us as we joined a forest of pray-ers. We pictured ourselves simply breathing out and releasing healing love toward Harper, imagining her body receiving our care. I honestly don't know how prayer works, but I can tell you that this vision has refreshed my prayers and given me a way to pray with imaginative hope. Hello to the mystery of prayer!

Hello to Both/And.

Our son, Brandt, wrote the first entry on [Harper's Caring Bridge](#) page: "We are 36 hours into the greatest nightmare of any parent's life coming true. Yesterday morning we woke up and our life was normal, our daughter was fine. Then the call, the hospital, the tests and the diagnosis.... Our baby



girl is more precious than literally anything to us, and to be forced to confront the nightmare of a life without her has broken us over and over again.”

To be honest, I can't go there. I can't even bear the thought of life without Harper, and I don't need to right now. Yet even during a nightmare like we're living, life isn't all darkness and despair. There are many good, good moments and real, tangible gifts. Sorrow and blessing, grief and gratitude, right here, sidled up to one another, arousing prayers of honest lament and genuine thanksgiving.

For example, we've joined the fraternity of families with children/grandchildren who have leukemia AND we've witnessed the beauty and strength of our families showing up for one another! We've experienced the roller coaster of Harper's re-hospitalizations, AND we've witnessed a "great cloud of witnesses" surrounding us in prayer and extravagant support. If our grief wasn't enough, on July 3rd, David's dad passed away, AND just a month before, we gathered close to one hundred friends of [Fall Creek Abbey](#) to celebrate our 10th Anniversary. Hello to a catalyst for authentic prayer. Hello to both/and.

“Here” Each Day

Tears come quickly and easily these days. And I've noticed a greater intimacy, honesty, and solidarity with God and our suffering world. I guess that's what happens when we suffer. Our hearts become more tender; our prayers more real. We have a long road ahead. While Harper's prognosis is really good, the treatment protocol is long and grueling. I don't know any other way to make this journey other than to be "here" each day and greet the reality of "here" with presence, kindness and openness; to remember that "In prayer, to begin where we are not is a poor beginning." So I try to begin at a better place and say hello to here.

Beth and David Booram are spiritual directors and chief stewards of [Fall Creek Abbey](#), an urban retreat center in Indianapolis, where they co-facilitate the Fall Creek Abbey School of Spiritual Direction. Beth is also an author of several books including [Starting Something New: Spiritual Direction for Your God-given Dream](#), and [When Faith Becomes Sight](#), co-authored with David.