

# The Root of All Suffering

by

**Matt McHugh**



Calvin once complained that there were not enough true martyrs in the world. It was in a sermon entitled "On Suffering Persecution," probably composed in the 1530's. The text of it is known to the world, known to me, from a 1906 treatise on *The World's Famous Orations*, compiled by William Jennings Bryan. The context of it, if I recall correctly, involved the observation that few seemed ready to suffer for their faith, even among those who practically invite persecution through misguided beliefs. I believe his specific phrase was: persons who foolishly expose themselves to death in maintaining absurd opinions.

Something like that. I may not have it exactly, and of course, a lot depends on translation. The gist of his argument is that such behavior is folly, not true religious zeal. He pointedly goes on to observe that while we all may suffer torment and death, only God can distinguish who qualifies for martyrdom. I think of this now, now that I can do nothing else.

There is a cloth hood over my head, held around my neck and chin by what feels like duct tape. My hands are bound behind my back with a plastic strip. I am on my knees, in my classroom at the Universitat de Barcelona, listening to men bark orders in Arabic and bad Catalan at my Comparative History Seminar students. They shot at least one already, randomly, before chaining the door behind them. I think another may have been hit as well.

They are soldiers of God and the brothers of martyrs. Or so they declared themselves upon their recent--and rather startling--entrance. Freedom fighters, in holy struggle against infidel tyranny, claiming the right to avenge those brother-martyrs, slaughtered in the assaults of the Godless West. Absurdities and follies, Calvin might well say.

The martyrs of liberty are justly honored only by winning the battle they began. Giuseppe Mazzini, if I'm not mistaken. Also from Bryan's *Oration*s. Quite a tome. Worth a whole course in itself. I should do that next semester.

There is a minor commotion, bodies and desks being shoved around. A space in the center of the room is being cleared. Once it is done, a strange silence.

There was silence deep as death. And the boldest held his breath. Thomas Campbell. Scotts poet. Always found him dreadful.

More conversations in Arabic. Not one of the four languages I speak. That always impressed people back home. In Chicago. Even at the University. Have you studied abroad? I used to study a broad in Italy, but then she got Venetian blinds. I'd use a Groucho Marx voice for that. He never said it, but he could have, don't you think? No one ever questioned me. No one ever questions me when I spout quotations, famous or obscure. If they only knew the liberties I took. I have a knack for making things sound authentic. My dirty little secret.

Something is being set up. I recognize the sound of zippered bags opening. The *clink* and *clack* of metal and plastic. Then, the unmistakable *puck* of a videocassette locking into a player. The *rasp* and *click* of a locking screw. A tripod. Camera and tripod. These guys came prepared.

The camera relieves us of the burden of memory. Eh, who is that? Some Brit. Writer-critic guy. Bergman? Berger. John Berger. That's it. Novelist. Won the Booker Prize in the '70's. Supposedly announced at the awards banquet that he was donating half the prize money to the Black Panthers in protest of the Booker family's ties to colonial slavery. Would loved to have seen the crowd's reaction to that.

Gunfire. It is so startling I don't even think to collapse to the floor. Several rounds, then nothing. Some of my students scream in panic, but I can tell they fired into the air. Bits of ceiling tile plop down around me. Perhaps they don't mean to kill us all. Perhaps we are hostages to be traded. When you overcome infidels in battle, make them prisoners, and afterwards either set them free or let them be ransomed. That's from the Qur'an, or at least some translation I saw once. A visiting junior professor and a dozen grad students, swapped for incarcerated terrorists. Right.

I hear the *whir* of the video camera. One speaks. Arabic again. I don't get a word of it, but it is a familiar tirade. I have seen them on Al Jazeera Spain. On YouTube before they pull them down. Religious vitriol and venomous politics. I find them difficult to watch, yet I have forced myself to study them, thinking there must be something to be learned. I know the grievances, and some are legitimate. But on the whole, then as now, I judge them little more than the rantings of madmen.

The most dangerous madmen are those created by religion. Diderot. The second half of the line further cautions that those who aim to disrupt society know how to make good use of them.

The speaker is speaking in Catalan now, making his point so the locals can understand. We desire the immediate release of our captive brethren. We desire the elimination of the illegal state of Israel. We desire the removal of all foreigners from our holy lands. We desire this. We desire that. We desire. *Nosaltres desitgem*, in Catalan. I desire to see my mother and father again. To sit and sip coffee in the Winter Garden at the Hyde Park Center. To see Michigan Avenue decorated for Christmas. I adore Chicago. It is the pulse of America. Sarah Bernhard.

I desire to come out of this alive. *Jo desitjo*. I desire. And we all know what the Buddha said about desire: it is the root of all suffering.

He finishes speaking. Again, there is a commotion. Yelling, struggle. Someone is being forced to the front of the room, to in front of the camera. I hear tape ripping, the *flap* of a hood coming off. I hear a young man, one of my students, crying... pleading. It may be Antoni. Maybe Anwar. I'm not sure. They tell him to look at the camera. They tell him what to say. He says it. It is not good enough. He is slapped, shoved down. Another student is dragged up and unhooded. He is told what to say. He says *¡Chingate!* Spanish, spoken with passion. That's got to be Ruben, the economics student from Madrid. No doubt about it. Very opinionated. *Bien hecho*, Ruben. Good for you.

Ruben is hit hard with something solid. Rifle butt, most likely. The *thud* I hear is, I am certain, Ruben's head hitting the floor. But that isn't enough apparently. The *sing* of a blade being drawn. Ruben screams, then gurgles. His feet thump the floor a few times, then he is still. I hear the camera tripod being moved, repositioned. Look. That is the fate of all who oppose God's will, someone says in Catalan. Death to the enemies of God's followers.

When I announced to friends and family I was moving to Spain to teach for a few years, more than one told me Be Careful! Remember those terrorist train bombings. That was Madrid, I said. This is Barcelona. Something like that's unlikely to happen there.

Whatever can happen to anyone can happen to me. Muriel Rukeyser. American poet. Jew. Reporter. Went to cover the 1936 Popular Olympiad games organized in Barcelona as a protest to the Nazi's Berlin Olympics. It was aborted due to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

Who here speaks English?

I hear the question, shouted in English. It surprises me, confuses me. I do not answer. I do, says a young woman from class. She is close to me. I feel several men approach and drag her to the middle of the room. *Whup*. She is unhooded.

Say this, a voice tells her. Know that the aggression and oppression of the West has awakened the just wrath of Islam. She says it, shakily. Know that the cowardly lands of Europe and America who deliver death from a distance will soon know death beyond their imagining. She says it. Know that for each one of our children you have murdered, ten-thousand of yours will die. She sobs and can barely say it. They yell at her, rough her about as she cries hysterically.

*Prou. Ja n'hi ha prou.* Enough, I say in Catalan. That's enough.

A blow on the side of my head knocks me to the floor.

It feels less like I fell over, than the floor upended and hit me. I am stunned. I don't think I've ever been slapped or punched before in my life. I lie face down, panting, trying to breathe. I am a mild man. I am a scholar. A thinker. A quoter. I should just lie here and wait. They will kill us all. That is their purpose. That is our fate. It can not be opposed. I must accept it. I must not hope. I must not wish for, must not allow myself to desire, any other outcome. It will only make it harder. I hear the girl weeping, and I weep at the sound of it. I weep with you, young lady. I weep for myself and you and what is soon to come. I am sorry. I wish things could be otherwise. I know history. I am not meant to be part of it. If I am to die now, let me die and be done with it.

Death is a debt we all must pay. Euripides. Death is a delightful hiding place for weary men. Herodotus. Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark. Francis Bacon. Death is the sound of distant thunder at a picnic. W.H. Auden. Death is nothing, but to live defeated and inglorious is to die daily. Napoleon. Death is terrifying because it is so ordinary. Susan Cheever. Do not fear death so much, but rather the inadequate life. Bertolt Brecht. It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees. Emiliano Zapata. Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once. Shakespeare.

I will die bound and masked, with a head stuffed full of quotations, chanting the litanies of other men, never having believed enough in anything to call forth a single act of courage from myself.

Is anyone here American?

"I am."

I said it loud, in English, before I'd even realized I'd done it. I struggle blindly to my feet.

"I am an American," I repeat.

I am grabbed, hauled to the center of the room, slammed to my knees. The pain is beyond my imagining. Like electrocution or drowning. Unbearable. I hear the young lady sobbing again. With this pain and fear, who would blame me if I join her in tears? But no. There is something else in me now. Rage. Coiled deep and rising. I am motionless, bowed and beaten, but a snarling, animal rage builds toward detonation inside me. I realize it has

always been there, but has never before found its form. It is a tiger, wounded and crouching in the brush, waiting to die with its teeth in a hunter's throat.

I hear the camera being set up before me. I feel a ring of men surround me. I sense the drawing of a blade. Fingers on the back of my neck, working loose the tape holding the hood. I will soon be unmasked. I wonder what will emerge: the lady or the tiger?

Time moves in microscopic increments. The tape comes loose, the cloth billows, air starts to rush in under it. What will I do? I wonder. What will I say? I am calm now, beyond fear or even pain. In these last moments, when all other possibilities are gone, I am left with only myself. And what actions I take, what words I speak, I know they will, at last--and perhaps for the first time--be truly and completely my own.

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