

Light in darkness

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 17, 2001](#) issue

On September 11, I was scheduled to lecture on Simone Weil's classic essay, "The Love of God and Affliction." I never made it to class—it was canceled due to the devastating, horrifying news of the World Trade Center attacks. We immediately organized a prayer service for the divinity school community—but what could be said, even in the context of prayer? What words could explain my own feelings, and especially the pain of those affected directly and the pain experienced by friends and colleagues frantically trying to get in touch with loved ones in New York City? How could I name the emptiness, the pain, the horror?

I returned to Weil's essay, which describes affliction as a condition deeper and more painful than suffering. "Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain." According to Weil, a French thinker who was writing in the bleak days of World War II, the physical, psychological and social dimensions of affliction converge to create a horror that seizes the soul.

Those of us in North Carolina were far removed from the physical pain of the attacks—but we identified vicariously through the televised pictures. A key passage in Weil's essay articulates the experience and the challenge we faced: "Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job. But if the soul stops loving it falls, even in this life, into something almost equivalent to hell."

As events unfolded through the day, it became clear to our divinity school community that we needed to "go on wanting to love." We had not really experienced affliction, but "affliction" described the reality we were trying to

understand. But how would the prayer service name our attempt to go on loving, or at least wanting to love?

We focused on three biblical passages. The first, from the opening verses of John's Gospel, included the words we read as we lit a candle of peace, hope and justice on the altar table. The candle—surrounded by barbed wire—had been given to us by South African Christians and had been a key symbol of hope in the midst of the bleakest times of apartheid oppression.

John's Gospel begins with an affirmation of Christ as the one by whom and through whom life and light are found. I spoke the words from my soul as they passed by my lips: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:3b-5).

Yet even as we lit the candle and spoke the words, we wondered whether the darkness had overcome the light. We turned to the Book of Lamentations: "My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, 'Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord'" (Lam. 3:17-18).

These words named the emptiness we were feeling. Even so, we continued to read: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him'" (Lam. 3:21-24).

After an extended period of silence and intercessory prayer, we concluded with words from Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me."

The pain, the emptiness, the horror remained—and will remain for some time to come. But as we continue to gather together, we realize that we go on wanting to love and that we continue to find words to name our hope.

We also sang together in the service, and discovered the power of music to stir our souls in ways that words alone cannot. As I felt the music enveloping us in praise and love, I wondered: could that praise inspire us, offer us new energy to reach out to others?

I did not anticipate the anxiety I felt as the service ended and the chapel emptied. The candle continued to burn. I did not want to extinguish the flame. The service was over; the symbolism had been powerful. But I wanted to be sure that the light would continue to shine in the darkness, even in its symbolic form.

I finally came to terms with the flame going out, but only in the hope that the hundreds of people who had gathered for prayer in the midst of affliction had departed with a portion of that flame, going forth into the world to bear witness to the light. And only in the hope that countless others will also bear witness to the light, and go on wanting to love.