

A lesson in mortality

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

It was a good spring day, at least until the late afternoon. The Sunday service at Emmaus, the little house church to which we belong, had been particularly helpful; afterwards I had been able to catch up on some necessary school work. By 4:30, the only thing left to do before my husband, Richard, and I went out to a pleasantly anticipated supper at some friends' house was to deliver a letter to the neighbors.

The air was chilly as I went out the back door; it was raining hard, and the shortest route to their house was up a small hill of muddy rocks. I ran up the hill quickly and dropped off my letter with no problem. The home stretch, however, was another matter. I slipped on a rock by their kitchen door, shot down the slope and landed in the ivy at the bottom--with my full weight on my left foot. My neighbor came at once when I shouted. Soon I lay face up under an umbrella on the wet cement. My left leg was crossed over my right with my foot hanging off to one side at a sickening angle.

The ankle was obviously badly broken. In the emergency room, doctors relocated the joint and X-rayed it. The following night the surgeon patched me back together as best he could with the aid of metal plates, screws and something that looked like a short meat skewer. On Friday, sick from the injury and disoriented from the painkillers, I was warned not to put any weight on my foot for at least three months. It was summer by the time the doctor finally took off the cast and removed the temporary part of the hardware. Soon I was hobbling around the house.

Nearly a year later, as I look back over those first 14 weeks and what I learned from the whole experience, I remember pondering a saying of Amma Syncletica, one of the only three women teachers of the Egyptian desert whose words are included in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: "If illness weighs us down, let us not be sorrowful as though, because of the illness and prostration of our bodies, we could not sing, for all these things are for our good, for the purification of our bodies."

"Let us not be sorrowful . . . as though we could not sing, for all these things are for our good!" I must admit that, despite how much the Ammas and Abbas have helped me over the years, I had never been able to understand their goody-goody advice

for dealing with injury or illness. But when I was immobilized, weak and in pain, their words sounded very different.

"Without temptation no one is saved," an Abba said, and he meant by this that it is only as we come face-to-face with our temptations that we are able to recognize them, wrestle with them and so make progress in following Jesus' commandment that we learn to love God and neighbor.

Though it would be a surprise to no one else in my life, it took a badly broken ankle to make me see certain ways in which I am tempted. One of the worst of these is the temptation to think that in order to be a strong, good and, I'm sorry to admit, Christian person, I would have to carry on my life and work as usual--independently, without physical or emotional help from anybody, no matter what was afflicting me.

This trait has had its advantages many times, particularly when the children were small, and there was no one around to make things easier. With a broken leg, however, there simply was no way to be self-sufficient. Especially in those first long weeks, when I had extra difficulties caused by the hardware, there were all sorts of things I could not do for myself, from getting a glass of water to pulling a book off the shelf. I became depressed as I tried to do without the things I needed because it was frightening, humiliating and demoralizing to admit to my husband, my friends or my children that I had to depend on them. This was a hard place, as Amma Syncletica says, in which to sing God's praises.

Of course, I had always known that there is nothing the slightest bit Christian about being too proud to ask for help, or about becoming touchy, slightly irritable and demoralized because I didn't want to accept help. I had never questioned the basic fact that it is not possible to be a Christian without acknowledging that none of us are saved by our own independent ability to take pain. All of us depend on other human beings as well as God for the basic and even not-so-basic necessities of our lives. Before the accident, I thought I *believed* what I knew; in a cast, I discovered I did not.

From the first afternoon home from the hospital, however, I understood that this was a spiritual issue I had to take seriously, and I wrestled with it in prayer and practice every day throughout my recovery.

Though I'm without the cast now, I still have a long way to go. But I think I've made real progress. I have learned to accept the help of family and friends with actual

pleasure as well as real gratitude, at least a good bit of the time. Though I would never presume to make this statement about someone else's injury or serious illness, I am quite certain that Syncletica gave me just the advice I needed. Living through the results of the accident in the presence of God was, indeed, good for me. It taught me a lot about singing.