

Medieval Wisdom on Healing Personal Discouragement

Who among us has not suffered discouragement, doubt, or sadness? When such feelings arise, we may hope a friend or loved one will help lift our spirit; we are disappointed when they don't. We may attempt to dull our unhappy feelings through distractions or dysfunctional behavior.

Many people when asked can tell you precisely what they think they need to be happier. Yet [the research is clear](#): a new job, a new relationship, a new house, or more money won't make you happier for long. As psychiatrist [Robert Rosenthal puts it](#), "In our desperate attempts to secure [happiness], we are like parched, shipwrecked sailors who guzzle seawater to slake their thirsts." That we cannot lift our discouragement by buying or consuming something is a hard lesson to learn.

In [his famous prayer](#), St. Francis of Assisi offered a healing balm for our discouragement. Instead of getting what we think we need, St. Francis asks us to give to others:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen

Yet precisely when we despair, this prayer seems out of reach. When we feel discouragement, our giving gauge seems pointed to empty. We want help; we don't want to help.

In his book [*Tunneling for Sunlight*](#), Gregg Krech points out, "It's the act of encouraging others that heals our own discouragement." How? By turning our attention towards others, we stop nourishing our own suffering:

The secret underlying this process has to do with attention. When we are discouraged, all of our attention is on ourselves. "My life is so hard. I don't have the strength. I'm disappointed and demoralized. I'm overwhelmed." Our attention is glued to our own suffering. But to encourage others, you have to shift your attention to the suffering of the other person. "How is their life hard? What is the nature of their difficulty? How can I support them?" When you shift your attention to encouraging someone else, you have removed the nourishment for your own suffering.

In his book [*Ask the Awakened*](#), the late Irish playwright Terence Gray, writing under the pen name Wei Wu Wei, asked, "Why are you unhappy?" His answer: "Because 99.9 percent of everything you think, and of everything you do, is for yourself—and there isn't one."

Gray's Taoist wisdom echoes St. Francis's: The more attention we place on ourselves, the more we suffer. If we receive what we give, we strengthen our suffering when we complain. There is all the difference between being with our suffering and creating a permanent story around our suffering.

Thomas à Kempis was a 15th Century German theologian. Sadness

naturally arises in response to life's disappointments; but as psychologist David K. Reynolds offers in his [reflections on Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*](#), "While feeling sad and doubtful [we can still] turn to what needs doing next." Reynolds, too, echoes St. Francis:

Find ways to be helpful and useful to others. Prove to yourself that feelings need not dominate and govern your life. Responding to these challenges repeatedly you learn one of life's most valuable lessons. Did you think that those you most respect and honor don't face moments of misery, self-criticism, and despair? What you see is what they did and do, not what they felt.

[Scholars now believe](#) the famous peace prayer of St. Francis was actually written in the 20th Century. No matter its origin, the prayer continues to inspire millions. "It is in giving that we receive." What can be a more precise pointer towards peace and happiness?

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