

The Mud and the Lotus

Corrie van den Bosch MSS



*Let the world be filled with the joy of white flowers
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The sorrow thereof....*

The last phrase trailed off on a minor note. I waited for the next line. There wasn't one; only silence. No one moved, accentuating the silence. The priest stood at the foot of the sanctuary to begin the liturgy; the woman who (I presumed) played the recorded refrain stood at the back of the sanctuary, facing the wall....

The above was a dream that came to me after reading a paper on Women and Suffering. The refrain continued to sing itself in me for the rest of the day, always ending in *The sorrow thereof...* followed by silence and stillness.

What is the sorrow thereof?

As I wait in stillness, I begin to hear the silent weeping of women fleeing war zones in Ukraine, fear and anxiety written on their faces, many carrying young children. Their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers left behind to defend their homes and country. My heart aches for them: *The sorrow thereof....*



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As I continue to wait in the silence, a scene comes to my mind's eye: people at the Romanian-Ukrainian border meeting their fleeing sisters with warm welcomes and the gift of flowers: *Let the world be filled with the joy of white flowers....*

How do those flowers speak to hearts filled with anguish? Their fragility meets the fragility of the weary women and children, symbolising the powerlessness of their givers: they cannot prevent the suffering of war. Yet with the gift of a flower, they welcome the refugees with the gentle touch of loving compassion. My heart aches with them: *The sorrow thereof....*

In the silent cries of our Ukrainian sisters, I hear the echo of countless other cries: in so many areas of the globe and of Earth herself: people and nature suffering deeply, bearing the unbearable pain arising from wars, oppression, famine, floods, climate change and many other sources. In the face of the tsunami of the world's pain I fall silent. My heart aches with them: *The sorrow thereof....*

I also become aware that I share responsibility for the human element in the sources of suffering and destruction. My heart aches with *the sorrow thereof...*

In the stillness and silence, aware of the suffering, I become aware of the peace of my own surroundings: *Let the world be filled with the joy of white flowers. Can the joy of white flowers bring some balm to the suffering world?*

This question brings to mind Kerrie Hide's CEN reflection posted in March, in which she traces the theme of love poured out in the ritual of anointing: from Mary of Bethany's anointing the feet of Jesus, to Jesus anointing the feet of his disciples by washing them, to the anointing of his body in preparation for burial. Every anointing takes place in the context of suffering. Yet the suffering remains in the background: the focus is on anointing as an outpouring of love, the total gift of oneself as balm on the wounds of the body and soul of another.

Every anointing is an outpouring of love, an outpouring of oneself in the tender loving tending of another. Love poured out, love received, love reciprocated: joy and suffering mingle in that anointing. Its fragrance fills the whole house with its sweetness. Is this also what *the joy of white flowers* is to be? Is it about pouring the fragrant healing ointment of love and compassion on the wounds of the world?



From a pragmatic point of view, white flowers are useless. So too is the music of the cellist playing in the bombed-out streets of Ukraine. And yet.... The beauty of music and of the flowers can lift the soul: suffering is not the whole story. There *is* beauty. There *is* goodness.

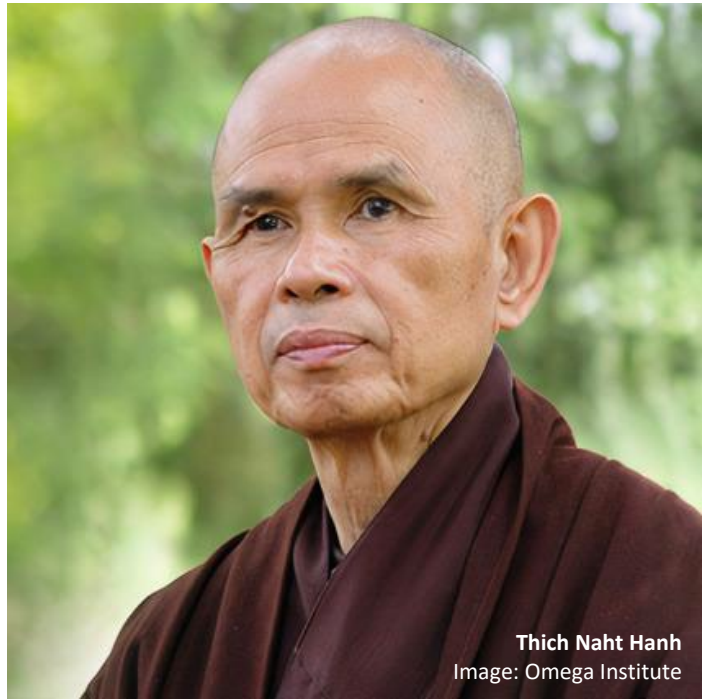
Where suffering abounds, women and men opened their homes and compassionate hearts to the fleeing Ukrainian people, lighting sparks of hope in the darkness: They are not alone....

[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com) © 1996-2022 The Washington Post March 23, 2022. Kharkiv cellist Denys Karachevtsev on March 20 played Bach's Cello Suite No. 5 outside the damaged remains of the Kharkiv regional police headquarters.

In the Christian tradition, Good Friday is the darkest day of the year. We commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus: the sinless one, who embodied the goodness, love and mercy of God, who was nailed to a cross as a criminal. In him, we see that God suffers in the suffering human beings visit on one another. That is a shocking statement. And yet... we call that day *Good Friday*. Why? Because on the cross we witness God's unconditional love and mercy poured out on the suffering world, forgiving, healing and reconciling us to God. In the death of Jesus, God offers us the balm of white flowers, of the heart-rending beauty of music and of the sheer goodness of people. In countless ways, the crucifixion continues to take place in our world whenever we close our hearts to others, individually, as societies and as nations. And yet... it is precisely there that *the joy of white flowers* blooms in the love and compassion of people and in the beauty of creation.

Joy and suffering are intimately related, something which the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, never wearied of repeating. They *inter-are*, he said.¹ We cannot have the one without the other. *Suffering* is the mud in which the lotus (of joy) grows and blooms. No mud, no lotus.

Thay, as his community called him, introduced the West to mindfulness. He taught that when we breathe mindfully, we come fully into the present moment. Whatever this moment holds, it is what it is. When we can look our suffering in its face, without denying it, fighting it, or smothering it with drugs or distractions, we learn that we are not our pain. Our reality, whether painful or not, is what it is, and we are not that. When we learn to accept suffering for what it is, then the lotus of compassion, peace and joy will grow and bloom in us and spread their fragrance to the world around us.



When Thich Nhat Hanh died, at the age of 93, in January this year, his death felt surprisingly personal for me: a light had gone out in our world. He truly lived what he taught, and sowed seeds of peace and joy which have bloomed in many of his disciples. In them, the white flowers of his life will continue to spread their fragrance of peace and hope throughout the world.

In our Christian tradition, we understand this flowering as the resurrection. It is the new life we experience when we emerge from a dark or painful time with acceptance and compassion. It is also the life we experience when we pour out all the love and compassion of our hearts as balm for the wounds of others. Easter is the celebration of life transformed through death; not only our final death, but through the daily experience of dying to our ego-selves for the sake of another, for the sake of our world. This is the life of the Spirit of Jesus in us which is the texture and fragrance of the season from Easter to Pentecost.

Our daily contemplative CEN hour invites us *fill the world with the joy of white flowers*. Fully present to its sorrow and suffering, we can pour on its wounds the balm of love, mercy and compassion. We cannot prevent suffering, but we can become the lotus which spreads its fragrance unnoticed, sweetening Earth's atmosphere for others to breathe.

¹ *Inter-are* is Thich Nhat Hanh's expression for what are two sides of the one reality. By it he means we cannot have the one – in this case *joy or happiness* – without the other – *suffering*. The same applies to all creation. All beings *inter-are*, including us human beings, Thay tells us. We only exist because every other being exists, every being interrelated with every other being.