By Fr. Joe Mannath, SDB —

Last May, I met someone who impressed me a great deal. This is how we met.

A parishioner I knew asked me: “Father Joe, can you spare a few minutes to say Hello to my friend Joan?” “Sure,” I said. Rather than my doing a favour to either of them, that visit turned out to be a wonderful gift for me.

Joan is a middle aged woman suffering from cancer of the lungs. That is not all. She has had twenty-four operations so far. An oxygen tank stands next to her bed. She lives alone, and moves around in her room in a wheelchair. Last year, her brother (whom she was very fond of) died. “That was hard,” Joan admits.

What struck me deeply is her attitude. “When some people are diagnosed of cancer, they react: ‘Why me?’ I think that is not correct. Why not me? I am not better than others.”

Joan made the following central truth of our faith meaningful for me. She told me with great
conviction: “I am convinced that God loves me very much.”

“God loves us” is a sentence I have heard many times. I have said it so many times myself, preached about it, written of it. Coming from the lips of someone in Joan’s condition, the same words take on a different quality altogether.

Joan is no dry, pious-sounding ascetic, but a normal woman with a good sense of humour. When her neighbour pointed out the oxygen tank to me, Joan smiled and said, “See, she is jealous of the things I have.”

If spirituality is the art of living wisely, lovingly and responsibly in our concrete setting with all its beauty and pain, then persons like Joan have much to teach us about spirituality. Their wisdom and inner poise are what the books talk about.

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“Don’t feel sorry for me!” Another person in whom I saw the “Why not me?” type of courage was a twenty-eight-year-old young man who was paralyzed from the waist down. It was Easter week, and I was about to go out on our annual house-blessing. The parish priest told me, “Joe, Charlie (not his real name) is paralyzed from the waist down. The only one looking after him all these years was his mother. She passed away two weeks ago. So, if you find him depressed or bitter, please be aware this is the situation.”

I visited this young man, told him I had heard of his mother’s death, and offered him my condolences. Before I could go on, Charlie stopped me. “Father, you do not have to feel sorry for me. I knew that my mother would not be there for me always. I am grateful that I had a good mother, and had her for twenty-eight years. As for my paralysis, it is true that I cannot walk. But my arms are good, and I have taught myself carving. In fact, I want to give you a present that I have made.” With this, he offered me a beautifully carved walnut bowl that he had carved.
**Not the event, but how I see it:** Attitude makes all the difference—or, at least, a great deal of difference. There is even a successful and well-known form of psychotherapy based on this simple truth. It is called Rational Emotive Therapy (RET for short). The basic principle of RET is this: *It is not the event that causes my emotion, but my interpretation of the event.*

To give an example, if you were to criticize this article or call me stupid, and if I were to become unhappy or depressed as a result, it is not really your reaction that caused my unhappiness, but my believing that I need everyone's approval to be happy, or my thinking that everything I do must be so perfect that no one will criticize it. If I hold on to such irrational beliefs (they are irrational, even if many people hold them), I will see myself as a victim. I will be convinced that I have good reasons for being unhappy.

The next time you feel like saying things like: “How can I be in a good mood after what has happened?” or “His ingratitude makes me so unhappy,” try a bit of RET on yourself. Who is the real villain of the piece—the external event, or your way of seeing it? Are you holding inner conversations along the line of: “I cannot face this...Everyone is laughing at me...If I do this, they will all criticize me...After what has happened, I will never be happy again...”?

Persons like Joan and Charlie teach us a better way of living—a happier, wiser way of reacting to setbacks they could have spent their entire life complaining about. You have probably met such gurus. How much poorer our world would be without their wisdom and their love of life!

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