

The Saint Thomas Guide to Happiness

Including the ‘Take a Bath’ Cure for what ails you

*This is an extended version of the Saint Thomas Guide, composed for people of faith and with a wider preview. For a brief overview of this content with a focus on grief, please see the **Essays** section of this website under **Coping with Grief**.*

Do you feel weighted down, exhausted by burdens and cares?
Burdened by illness? Sorrow? Pain? Caregiving concerns? Or grief?

Take a bath.

Seriously. Some of the best minds in history agree. It turns out that taking a bath is not only good for you, but a highly recommended remedy for pain and sorrow.

Surprised?

It’s true. Saint Thomas of Aquinas himself weighs in. As does Aristotle. And Saint Augustine.

In fact, Thomas of Aquinas’s book, the *Summa Theologica* covers a variety of matters, both practical and theological. Unfortunately, for much of history, the book has received a bad rap, at least among non-scholars. Most laypeople take one look at the size and heft of the volumes and, if they are not weightlifters, flee—overwhelmed by even the thought of reading such a missive.

And that’s too bad, because, as the saying goes, ‘There is a lot of there, there.’

In view of redeeming at least parts of the practical Thomas from the bookshelf of intellectual irrelevance, we will take a peek at the hidden Thomas—the proverbial ‘pocket Aquinas,’ where plentiful practical wisdom is interspersed with considerable intellectual heft. In the process, most of us will likely come away with a few handy tools for ‘living the gospel of love’ and for implementing ‘self-stewardship.’

Thomas, it turns out, was keenly aware of the sorrows of life—of the burdens of living in a broken world. Not infrequently in his writings, he expresses concern about the weight of grief and sorrow in our lives. In search of a remedy, he quotes Saint Augustine, who in turn quotes Aristotle.

(All of the following quotes can be found in Summa, Question 38 under the section entitled ‘Remedies for Sorrow or Pain.’)

“Augustine says, I have heard that the bath derived its name from the fact that it drives away distress of spirit ...

We have seen that sorrow, of its nature, is inimical to the body’s vital energy; anything therefore that restores that motion to normal is at odds with sorrow, and will mitigate it.

Further, by restoring the system to normal, these remedies are a source of pleasure ... sorrow will be assuaged by bodily remedies such as these."

There you have it:

Baths can be a source of pleasure and a remedy for "distress of spirit." But let's not stop there. It turns out that 'therapeutic bathing' is only one of a series of recommendations that Thomas and company makes for "distress of spirit." (In fact, it is the final 'treatment' for sorrow he mentions in this section of the Summa.)

Under the section entitled "Remedies for Sorrow or Pain." Thomas basically treats of five ways of reducing sorrow or pain:

- (1) delight,
- (2) weeping or groaning,
- (3) the sympathy or company of friends,
- (4) contemplation of truth, and
- (5) sleeping or taking baths.

Each of these is the subject of a brief "article," but here's the quick summary; italics indicate when Aquinas is quoting from someone else.

Article (2): "Augustine says that when he was sorrowing over his friend's death, *it was only in sobs and tears* that he found *a little relief*. ... Hurtful things hurt still more if they are pent up inside us, for the soul is then more concentrated upon them; but if they are released, the soul's energies are turned to things outside itself, and interior pain is thus lessened."

Article (3): "It is natural, in sorrow, to be consoled if a friend shares our grief. Aristotle suggests two reasons.

First, sorrow weighs one down; it is a load which, of course, one tries to lighten. When therefore a person sees others joining him in sorrow, it feels as if they are helping him carry the load, trying to lessen its weight on him; so the burden weighs on him less heavily, just as in the case of carrying physical weights.

The second reason is a better one. When a person's friends share in his sorrow, he sees that they love him: and this fact is itself a source of delight."

When Augustine was sorrowing, it was 'only in sobs and tears' that he found 'a little relief.' Again, note the wisdom of the ages, uncluttered by modern cultural imperatives regarding crying being somehow unmanly. Augustine, who it should be noted, was no one's sissy, (Read his 'Confessions' for more details on just what an 'unsissy' he was!) found relief from his grief in tears.

Perhaps if more persons who share Augustine's chromosomal make up (and those who don't) were allowed, even encouraged, to allow their 'eyes to sweat,' their own interior pain would be lessened as well. A body, after all, sweats when confronted with a heavy physical work-out. Why shouldn't it be the same for a soul?

One is reminded of Washington Irving, who had this to say about tears:

"There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love."

The sentiment that tears "are not the mark of weakness, but of power," would have resonated well with Thomas, Augustine, and Aristotle. And as anyone who has experienced significant grief will attest, waves of sorrow can roll in without a moment's notice—brought on by the simplest of stimuli, from the sight of a woman who looks like a beloved spouse now deceased, or the sound of a voice like that of a long-dead brother, even the whiff of a favorite perfume or cologne.

As St. Thomas so eruditely notes, *"Hurtful things hurt still more if they are pent up inside us, for the soul is then more concentrated upon them."* Truer words were never spoken... Anyone who has discovered the healing effects of tears is likely to testify that tears can indeed lesson interior pain.

As for remedy # 3: *"It is natural, in sorrow, to be consoled if a friend shares our grief."* Aristotle's words bely the idea that 'philosophers' are more concerned with an indistinct realm of thought than the basic concerns of everyday living. 'A le contraire,' the best in philosophy has always been intimately concerned with practical as well as the ethereal wisdom. Thus, it makes perfect sense to note that the sympathy or company of friends helps assuage sorrow.

Aristotle's two reasons for this: *"First, sorrow weighs one down; it is a load which, of course, one tries to lighten. When therefore a person sees others joining him in sorrow, it feels as if they are helping him carry the load, trying to lessen its weight on him; so the burden weighs on him less heavily, just as in the case of carrying physical weights."*

"I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders" is the sort of statement any one of us experiencing intense personal sorrow could make. In Cameroon West Africa, where women walk for many miles each day just to collect the wood family members needs for warmth and cooking, the statement is literal as well as figurative. There, women can be seen walking long distances with unbelievably large stacks of firewood balanced precariously right on top of their heads.

In response to this sight, the locals use a Pidgin English expression: *"Ashaw."*

Ashaw means, quite literally, *'sorry for your heavy burden.'* And it is used both for women actually bearing the weight of wood on their shoulders and for a person experiencing sorrow or difficulties—for the figurative burden. *'Ashaw for troubles!'* a sympathetic friend might say in response to a tough day or an ill loved one. Sadly, we don't have a similar expression in the King's English that describes communal empathy so sweetly.

But it is interesting that villagers high in the mountains of West Africa would intuitively grasp what Aristotle in Greece some two thousand years before Christ was trying to communicate: that sorrow is indeed a load, and that that load is best lightened when shared willingly and lovingly by friend and family.

The second reason that the company of friends assuages sorrow is intuitive as well: *“When a person’s friends share in his sorrow, he sees that they love him: and this fact is itself a source of delight.”* Love, the great liberator. Genuine love, and by this Aristotle must have meant what the Greeks called ‘agape,’ is perhaps the most helpful healer of all. (Though ‘eros,’ more properly, could be best described as the true love of a friend.)

To know that one is loved is a delight—true love casts out sorrow—or at least mitigates it to the degree that it becomes more bearable.

Think back for a minute to some of your earliest experiences of sorrow. Say you skinned a knee or fell down riding your bike. Or say your pet dog died—or you got picked last in sports. Did the pain go away eventually on its own, or did you run to someone who loved you, someone like a mother or father, brother, sister, or best friend, who shared in your pain, someone who lessened the burden of fear and suffering simply through loving you—and allowing you to ‘tell the story’ of your sorrow, albeit punctuated by gulps and sobs. Eventually, the combination of time and love healed those particular sorrows.

Then came the day when you became a ‘big boy’ or ‘big girl.’ And you learned, over time, to ‘swallow’ disappointment and sorrow—to ‘go it alone’ in distress. While it’s obviously helpful not to grow to adulthood crying over every little thing, it is also not helpful to cry over nothing at all. And it is definitely not helpful, either to your body or your soul, to ‘stuff it inside’ to ‘go it alone.’ Doing that just makes your body feel as sick as your spirit.

Even by the second century before Christ, the Greeks had that figured out.

So why can’t we?

Aristotle, Thomas and Augustine agree on something else we Americans have a tough time with: Remedy # 4 for pain and sorrow, which is: *“the contemplation of truth.”*

Hmmm. There’s an idea: To contemplate truth. But how, exactly, *does* one ‘contemplate truth?’

To American ears, it all sounds esoteric to say the least, or worse than esoteric, boring, especially in view of our ‘busy, busy, oh so very busy’ culture. We don’t allow much time or importance for either contemplation or for truth, so it’s no wonder the endeavor doesn’t exactly inspire immediate confidence.

How do we spend our time if not in pursuit of truth? The answer, sad to say, is watching far too much TV and playing far too many video games. And endless and pointless internet surfing. Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat: all of the above, all of the time. And implementing our vaunted ‘purchasing power’ through never-ending ‘retail therapy.’ And more. Not to say that some TV

watching and internet education seeking and even some video games playing or shopping isn't OK: Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat can even be good, in moderation. The problem is the hours and hours (and hours!) of imbibing in such pursuits: it's the difference between gorging on fistfuls of cotton candy vs delighting in a bit of dark chocolate. So much time is lost—time we'll never get back, time we need for respite and relaxation which fill us versus entertainment gluttony, which does not.

But the point is that if we were to allot even a smidgen of that wasted time every day to, say, spiritual reading, or to genuine prayer, or thanksgiving, or almsgiving, we would doubtless feel better. Because much of what we spend our 'down' time on is the vacuous pursuit of an anesthetized life, rather than the pursuit of true happiness which only comes from 'giving rather than receiving,' from filling up the reservoir of our spirit from the endless Source of truth.

Truth is a powerful remedy for sorrow and for stress, as Augustine knew well enough to describe in his oft quoted passage:

"Our hearts are restless, oh God, until they rest in thee"

To contemplate the love of God is to contemplate ultimate truth and ultimate beauty. And to receive ultimate consolation. For we are creatures not only of the body, but of the soul. And, as such, any real consolation we receive must entwine both.

It is a struggle to live in truth—and to live the life of love, especially in the modern world. But we are in good company.

For hundreds, even thousands of years, men and women have struggled with the weight of grief and sorrow in their lives. And with how to introduce meaning into the struggles of everyday life. The fruit of their suffering has been the 'wisdom of the ages'—a series of practical suggestions that we can apply even now, to decrease the burdens we bear, either in grief or in caregiving, at work or in school, in the home or in the community.

In summary then, Aristotle, Thomas, and Augustine suggest five ways of reducing sorrow or pain. They are, as follows: (1) delight, (2) weeping or groaning, (3) the sympathy or company of friends, (4) contemplation of truth, and (5) sleeping or taking baths.

In fact, numbers one to five above might well be read as prescriptions—a modern RX for a very ancient problem—the problem of suffering. It might behoove each of us to take a few moments and write the prescription down—either on a three by five card, in our daily schedule book, or on our computer.

Write them one at a time as **'The Saint Thomas Guide to Happiness:'**

1. Delight in loving and in being loved.
2. Weep in sorrow; groan in disappointment.
3. Allow the company of dear friends to comfort you, and in turn, comfort your friends in sorrow.

4. Make time to drink in and contemplate truth, time for prayer, for consolation received from on high. For listening to the still small voice of the Spirit.
5. Take a bath. Exercise your soul and your body. And be sure to rest—to sleep—to take good care of yourself, to be a steward of the gift of you.

Five remedies; simple, yet profound.

And what better way to begin than with the last suggestion than by taking a bath.

Take a bath?!? Are you mad?!? Who has time to take a bath, for God's sake? It turns out, that no one has time—for anything. But we do make time—for things that are important. And this is. Besides, 'for God's sake' and for our own, is exactly why we do need to take a bath.

So, the next time the sorrows of life seem to be weighing you down, next time the hectic pace of 'the news cycle' accelerates and you feel your pulse quickening and your stomach roiling, the next time you feel the sorrow of grief amid the flurry of everyday activities, try something different.

Throw away that Zantac. Scrub the Tums. And turn off the TV, shut down the internet. Instead, follow: *'The Saint Thomas Guide to Happiness.'*

Slow down. Draw a bath and light a candle. Put on some music and soak. Pray. Soothe your spirit. Quiet your heart. Remember your loved ones, living and dead. Breathe out sorrows. Breathe in blessings. Cherish friendships, relationships. Reflect. Rejoice. Get things in perspective. Pray some more. Read. Relax.

If Thomas, Augustine, and Aristotle could take time out from their busy lives to bathe, so can you. Besides, it won't take much time and it just might make a difference.

If you're not used to the practice, you might feel silly the first time you endeavor to take a 'therapeutic bath' or hot tub (or the second!). But stick with it.

You might even want to consider 'scheduling' bath time once or twice a week. Soak up the ancient art of relaxation. Allow yourself to unwind. (Add some Epsom salts—a great source of much needed magnesium.) The therapeutic effects of bathing have been known for some time—the tradition of bathing as a means of mitigating distress is shared across cultures and histories. Think back to the Roman baths, to the Japanese tradition of bath houses—even to Jesus' time.

The pace of life today allows little time for the sorts of common-sense solutions like bathing, which have worked for a millennium and more. And studies show that Americans are sleeping less and working more.

Free time is more often than not used for activities that may or may not result in respite for the soul and which most times do not at all include such remedies as 'contemplation of truth'. Some downtime activities are downright dismissive, even destructive to the life of the soul or of

contemplation of truth. (Think of any number of popular television series or the un-godly things one can find on the internet.)

It's no wonder we're exhausted and stressed out much of the time. There really is too much to do. And too little time to do it in. And too much to buy and way too much to accomplish. And too little time for grieving. Way too little.

So what gives? What can possibly give in order to do and accomplish all the culture asks of us?

The answer? We do. We give. We give of our spiritual health and our physical well-being, of our families and our marriages. Our communities and parishes give—as does much else that matters.

The prescription for what ails us is as old as it is effective: Subtract that which is unhealthy and add that which is not nutritious. Soul-food does not always refer to grits—it also refers to guts—the guts to make positive changes, to be stewards of our souls and our bodies, to feed ourselves strong food rather than junk.

And to relax. To have respite for the soul and for the body, to make time for friends of the heart and for thinking about the things that matter—the people in our lives who delight—especially the Lord of all consolation.

It sounds like a lot—and it is.

But it is not difficult. (And besides we have help! From friends and from God.)

Try one thing first, and the rest will follow.

Join with the brightest minds in history. Join with Saint Tomas of Aquinas, Saint Augustine, and Aristotle. Try what worked for them: It just might work for you.

Take a bath. And go on from there.

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