

Pauline Anstruther, a character in Charles Williams' novel *Decent Into Hell*, since childhood has lived with a terrible, secret, shameful fear. Peter Stanhope is the first person to whom she reveals it, and his response shocks and confuses her:

*"But, he said, "I don't quite understand. You have friends; haven't you asked one of them to carry your fear?"*

*"Carry my fear?... How can anyone carry my fear?"*

Now ashamed, and wishing she hadn't told him about it, Pauline tries to change the subject, but Stanhope persists:

*"Will you tell me whether you've any notion of what I'm talking about? And if not, will you let me do it for you?"*

She says politely, *"Do it for me?"*

*"It can be done you know...It's surprisingly simple. And if there's no one else you care to ask, why not use me? I'm here at your disposal, and we could easily settle it that way. Then you needn't fear."*

*"But how can I not be afraid?...It's hellish nonsense to talk like that ..."*

*"It's no more nonsense than your own story. That isn't, very well, this isn't. We all know what fear and trouble are...When you leave here you'll think to yourself that I've taken this particular trouble over instead of you. You'd do as much for me if I needed it or for any one. And I will give myself to it. I'll think of what comes to you, and imagine it, and know it, and be afraid of it. And then you see, you won't....Haven't you heard it said that we ought to bear one another's burdens?"*

*"But that means..."* she begins, and stops.

*"I know,"* Stanhope says. *"It means listening sympathetically, and thinking unselfishly, and so on. Well, I don't say a word against all that; no doubt it helps. But I think when Christ or St. Paul, or whoever said bear, he meant something much more like carrying a parcel instead of someone else. If you're still carrying yours, I'm not carrying it for you—however sympathetic I may be."*

Pauline says, “*And if I could do—whatever it is you mean, would I? Would I push my burden on to anybody else?*”

Stanhope replies, “*You must give your burden up to someone else, and you must carry someone else’s burden...This is a law of the universe, and not to give up your parcel is as much to rebel as not to carry another’s. You’ll find it quite easy if you let yourself do it.*”

In another book, commenting on the priests, scribes, and elders who taunted Jesus on the cross, saying, “*He saved others; he cannot save himself!*” Charles Williams says, “Precisely. An exact definition of Christ’s kingdom.”

Like Pauline Anstruther, I have only the dimmest idea of what Stanhope—and Williams—are talking about. And so I think I must have only the dimmest idea of what St. Paul means when he told the Galatians to *bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

But here we are, each burdened in his or her own way with hard choices, failed plans, anger, shame, new and old fears. So I’m thinking it’s a good time to find out. Commanded to give up our burdens and take up another’s—*whatever that means*—let us pray as St. Francis prayed:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we 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.*