

READING FOR SESSION 8

Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer was once asked why there is suffering in the world. He answered, "This complaint is also made in the Book of Job; it is also answered there. And believe me, the complaint is a lot more interesting than the answer."

Humanity has developed its own litany in response to what author Peter DeVries calls life's "eternal severities" and the meaning of human suffering. How often have we heard others say, or found ourselves saying, these words?

My God, I can't believe this is happening to me!
I'm so totally unprepared.
I'll never be the same.
My life's a failure.
Everywhere I look now, I only see reason for despair.
I just plain feel sorry for myself, that's all.
I feel trapped in this useless body.
Helpless, utterly helpless...
I want to scream and I can't.
What did I do to deserve this?
I'll never make it through another day.
I don't want to hear about anybody else's problems.
Everyone is a stranger. I feel totally alone.
I keep expecting to wake up and be healed.
Why me?

As we ask these all-too-human questions, we receive all-too-easy answers—spiritual clichés like "Make lemonade out of lemons," "That which doesn't kill us makes us stronger," "Time heals all wounds," and "It was God's will." These bromides from well-intentioned people can be spiritually impoverishing when life is a broken arc. So what do we make of the pain? What do we do with it?

First, we try to make sense of it. *Theodicy* is the technical theological term for trying to explain the ways of God to humanity. In the context of suffering, it is simply the age-old question "Why do bad things happen to good people?" One of the first explorations of that question is the biblical book of Job, a literary masterpiece.

Job is an upright and prosperous man who is buffeted with all manner of afflictions because of

a wager between God and Satan. God is proud of Job, a faithful servant, but Satan bets that Job would become unfaithful if only he had to experience some of life's shadow times—sickness, poverty, and death. God calls Satan's bluff and torments his creature. Job responds as human beings have over the millennia. He is angry and explodes, "Why me? I've been good!"

Job finally confesses his finitude before the Almighty—"Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." But Job is not satisfied with his own abject resignation and continues to question why he suffers. His three companions are not able to comfort him or explain the reason. Then, in one of the great passages of the Bible, God speaks out of the whirlwind: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who fixed its measurements? Who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

Thus rebuked Job can only say "Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him." Forrest Church calls the Job story the "first anti-self-help book." Suffering is inherent in life; we can but accept our fate and move on with courage. In Job, human beings are finite creatures living in a mysterious cosmos and cannot expect an easy justice. God is an impersonal, inscrutable cosmic force. Writers for the so-called Deuteronomistic school could not let the matter rest there—their "do good and prosper" piety had been assaulted. They could not abide the idea that bad things happen to good people. And so, they added editorial touches to the original tale and Job's fortune was restored with divine interest. Now he has seven sons and three daughters and presumably lives happily ever after: "And Job died, an old man, and full of days."

So where can we find the courage to accept our fate? The Buddhist author Pema Chodron writes, "When I was first married, my husband said I was one of the bravest people he knew. When I asked him why, he said because I was a complete coward but went ahead and did things anyhow."

Buddhism responds to the human predicament of the broken arc by the first of its Four Noble Truths: Life is suffering. Pain is part and parcel of the human condition. There is no point trying to evade or avoid it. The Buddhist tradition

offers the story of the “mustard seed medicine.” A young mother carries a dead child to the Buddha and asks him to bring the child back to life. He requests that the woman go first into the village and gather mustard seeds from any home that has not known death. Of course she returns empty-handed, realizes that death is universal and that she must bury her child and move on with living.

Humanity has developed many explanations for human suffering. One popular view is that God sends suffering to test us, giving us no more than we can handle. If we are worthy, we endure our suffering and are assured eternal bliss.

Nancy Mairs, a Unitarian Universalist woman with multiple sclerosis, has written insightfully about this issue:

Some people will say, “God never gives us more than we can handle”—which I think is utter [expletive deleted]. Because if God’s doing the giving, then God routinely gives us much more than we can possibly handle—MS is one such thing. But I couldn’t believe in a God who would do such a thing anyway. I don’t know how people can practice a religious faith if they think of God doing such things.

Another philosophy of suffering has a certain currency: God sends us suffering because we have been evil and God withholds suffering if we have been good. That canard should have been rejected long ago—the book of Job symbolizes its inadequacy. The lives of the martyrs and the deaths of the prophets should tell us how blasphemous a notion this is. From the crucifixion of Jesus to the assassinations of Gandhi and King, it is clear the righteous often suffer. From the oppressive pharaohs of ancient Egypt to the callously indifferent in our own time who profit from terrorism and war, it is clear the evil often prosper. We all know good people who suffer, and bad people who flourish.

Belden Lane proposes a third school of thought that perhaps brings us closer to the truth. He maintains that suffering comes to us from an indifferent universe, a universe of merciless cause and effect—where we meet “a God of fierce indifference.” We can do nothing but recognize that we are part of the “fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain,” as Albert Schweitzer so eloquently describes it.

While I agree in part with this attitude, it is just a bit too passive for me. Some suffering can be and ought to be eliminated. There ought not to be starvation in a world that can produce enough food for everyone. There ought not to be poverty in a land of plenty. Much suffering can be ended.

This leads to a fourth understanding of suffering, which resonates in Unitarian Universalist thinking. Suffering can and ought to be eliminated. Our task is to so order the world that human suffering will at least be minimized. We are a proactive people; we are social activists; we want to change the world.

Agreed, but some suffering is endemic in human life. No matter how much we strive to reduce it, it cannot be eliminated. We are finite creatures in an indifferent universe. When all is said and done, we die. Unitarian Universalists need to realize that however much we want to be in control of our destiny, in many ways we are helpless before the inexorable suffering that afflicts us; pain is the price we pay for living. Suffering is less a problem to be solved than a mystery to be lived.

Finally, suffering can be understood as an inherent part of the human condition and an essential source of life meaning. How we deal with inevitable suffering is one of the ways we find purpose in our lives.

Mairs writes,

We see disability as a social construction I do not consider suffering an aberration, or an outrage to be eliminated at any cost It strikes me as intrinsic to the human condition. I don’t like it. I’m not asked to like it. I must simply endure in order to learn from it. Those who leap forward to offer me aid in ending it, though they may do so out of the greatest compassion, seek to deny me the fullness of experience I believe I am meant to have.

Victor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist who spent years in a Nazi death camp, suggests that if we have a “why” to live, we can bear any “how” or “what.” He found that in struggling through his pain, he created life meaning for himself. How we respond to our suffering is the last of the human freedoms.

It is, of course, dangerous to romanticize suffering as a source of life meaning. Baseball owner Bill Veeck debunks that notion when he says cyn-

ically, "Suffering is overrated. It doesn't teach you anything." That is, of course, a possibility. We have known—or have ourselves been—persons who are embittered by the pain we experience. It can make us small; it can suck out the best in us; it can strip away the better angels of our nature. Intellectually we know we should not be bitter, that we should transmute our pain into courage, that we should learn from our suffering, that we should even teach out of our hurt. But that is hard business, and we all know it.

Unitarian Universalists are pragmatists and activists; we want to control the world in which we live. We are distinctly uncomfortable about suffering when there seems little we can do to reduce it or to end it. In the book *Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches*, the late Carl Wennerstrom, a Unitarian Universalist minister, presents the following thesis:

Religious liberals have been so preoccupied with the transformation of society they have neglected the transformation of individuals. Our tendency in the face of suffering is to organize to eliminate it, to reform society, and above all to act against the causes of suffering. In so doing we deal with issues, problems and causes, not with persons.

Wennerstrom explores the biblical scene in which Jesus is carrying the cross to Calvary:

The first liberal is there helping Jesus, but when the cross was placed in the ground and Jesus was nailed upon it, the liberal was not there. Perhaps he was off trying to get a stay of execution or a reversal of the conviction or planning for the future support of Jesus' family or the burial arrangements or getting up a petition to Rome on the irresponsibility of Pilate. The point is that he was absent at the point of the crucifixion—the time of personal suffering.

We might come to these four conclusions about life as a broken arc:

Pain, discouragement, and death are part of the landscape of being human.

Some suffering belongs to the structure of things and is part of our fate, like death. We can do nothing about it. Some suffering is humanly caused and we can and ought to alleviate these

self-inflicted hurts for ourselves and for others, but we must face up to the fact life is messy. Some problems can never be solved. Some hurts are never healed. There are no cosmic babysitters. That is the hard truth of being human. As William Murray tells us, a little boy one day asks the great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick why God puts all the vitamins in spinach and not in ice cream. Dr. Fosdick replies that he does not know why but that life is just that way.

Each of us matters, and so do our hurts.

Therefore, as we sit together on what Nicholas Wolterstorff refers to as "humanity's mourning bench," we need to listen to those voices from our own center that enable us to muster the passion to endure. Poet Ann McCracken reminds us, "The broken heart still beats."

Suffering shared is suffering halved.

We can live with any pain if we live in a caring community. None of us can do it out there all alone. That spiritual truth is symbolized by the simple ritual of joys and sorrows. By lighting a candle and speaking to our own beloved community, we know we are not alone.

There is a horizon beyond our immediate experience, a greater context in which we live and move and have our being.

Understanding ourselves in the larger picture of cosmos, history, and community helps us gain perspective on our lives and helps us heal. In our best moments we find meaning in the wounds inflicted upon us.

Sometimes that perspective is gained through poetry. Unitarian Universalist poet Peshya Joyce Gertler, puts it this way in "The Healing Time":

Finally on my way to yes I bump into all the
places where I said no to my life
all the untended wounds—the red and purple
scars
those hieroglyphs of pain carved into my
skin, my bones,
those coded messages that send me down
the wrong street again and again
where I find them—the old wounds—the old
misdirections

and I lift them one by one close to my heart
and I say holy holy.

Sometimes that perspective comes to us through humor. An ad in a British newspaper describes a lost cat: "old, mangy, one-eyed, limped, neutered, crippled. Answers to the name Lucky." That ad may seem contradictory, but in a larger sense, with all our pain and suffering, with all our discouragement and depression, with our finitude as ever-present background, we are lucky to be alive, to have an opportunity to grow a soul, to share the ministry of pain, to be able to transmute the "eternal severities" into meaning, to live in the embrace of a broken arc.

The Sufi mystic poet Rumi writes,

Come, come whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,
come.
Come, though you have broken your vow a
thousand times.
Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, yet
again, come.