

MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERING

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

October 3, 2010

On Friday evening, Renee and I watched a NetFlix movie that had been gathering dust on top of our TV for more than two months. The title of this film is “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas.” Have any of you seen it? This movie tells the story of two eight-year-old boys who are caught up in the tragedy and suffering of the Holocaust. One of them is the son of the German commander of a Jewish concentration camp, and the other is a Jewish boy who is imprisoned in the camp. Their bond of friendship strengthens in spite of the barbed wire fence and all of the Nazi propaganda that are intended to separate them. In a dramatic plot twist at the end of the film, the two boys die together in the camp’s gas chamber, both of them innocent victims of the human willingness to deliberately inflict pain and suffering on other humans, which is how I define **evil**.

Thanks to advances in global communication technology, we are more aware of the suffering of our fellow human beings than any other generation in history. In addition, all of us will sooner or later be faced with the reality of pain and suffering as a personal experience. Our most immediate response to suffering is **why?** Why do innocent people suffer from disease or natural catastrophe or human cruelty? Why do I or someone I love suffer from a life-threatening illness? Why do bad things happen to good people? **How can we make sense of suffering?**

The answers to these anguished questions offered by traditional Christianity are often not convincing. Let me briefly address some of the most common explanations. First, that suffering is the punishment for human sinfulness. This explanation does account for the fact that much of human suffering is **self-inflicted**, especially in the form of addiction, neglect, and violence. But it does not explain why innocent bystanders also suffer. Pat Robertson’s blanket explanation that the Hurricane Katrina disaster was God’s punishment for the wickedness of New Orleans disregarded the suffering of thousands of innocent victims of this catastrophe. Second, that suffering is the work of the devil. To me, the figure of Satan is a projection of the human capacity for evil. To blame it on the Devil is to avoid responsibility. And finally, the view that

human suffering is a test of faith. What kind of God would deliberately cause the death of a family member or a tragic accident or an incurable disease as a test of the survivors' faith commitment?

The theistic image that God is all-knowing (omniscient), all-powerful (omnipotent), **and** perfectly good runs into serious trouble when we try to make sense of **undeserved** suffering. All three of these themes appear in the familiar story of Job, a righteous man who suffers all kinds of personal calamities and eventually challenges Jehovah's fundamental sense of goodness and justice. In response, Jehovah offers what I call his "you little twerp" speech—a thundering assertion of his power and his omniscience **without** addressing Job's challenge to his goodness. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" . . . Who determined its measurements . . . surely you know! [Job, chap. 38] In the unsatisfying conclusion to the story, Job submits to Jehovah's overwhelming power, and Jehovah awards him a consolation prize by providing him with a new family and fortune. [Job, chap. 42] To me, the Book of Job is the most subversive book in the Old Testament.

The New Testament offers still another explanation: that suffering can be **redemptive**. William Murry summarizes this view: "If one has sinned, perhaps by suffering one can be relieved of guilt and feel that one has atoned for his or her wrongdoing. This idea is extended in the idea of **vicarious** suffering. Christ's suffering on the cross is believed to atone for the sins of others and thus to redeem them. Deep in the Christian tradition is the view that the suffering of believers may help to transform their lives and the lives of others." [A *Faith for All Seasons*, p. 62] An extreme example of this view is the graphic suffering of Jesus depicted in Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ." The underlying assumption is that the more suffering and humiliation the sinless Son of God is forced to endure, then the greater is his redemptive power for the sins of humankind.

In their autobiographical book *Proverbs of Ashes*, Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker (who is president of the UUA's Starr King School of Ministry) directly confront the idea that violent suffering is redemptive. Both of these women have been victims of violence. "Jesus has been betrayed by his own tradition," they conclude. "A military empire murdered him. His life and

work were not furthered by his death. His execution ruptured his community. . . . But Western Christianity claims we are saved by the execution, that violence and terror reveal the grace of God. This claim isolates Jesus, as violence isolates its victims. When the victims of violence are made singular, solitary, unprecedented in their pain, the power of violence remains. Jesus' death was not unique. The torture visited on Jesus had been visited on many. It continues in the world, masked by the words 'virtuous suffering' and self-sacrificing love.'" [pp. 249-50]

The meaning of suffering is not likely to be found in our answers to the question of **why** suffering exists, but rather in our response to it. William Murry says, "The first step on the way to living well in the midst of suffering involves accepting suffering as an integral part of life. To accept suffering is not to encourage it or to imply that we must like it, but to recognize it as a normal and natural part of life, a part of life without which human life would be very different from what we know. To accept suffering is to accept the reality that life includes both tragedy and joy." [*A Faith for All Seasons*, p. 76] In the words of Kahlil Gibran:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. **And how else can it be?**

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. . .

["On Joy and Sorrow," *The Prophet*, p. 29]

A friend recently steered me to a book about the carving power of suffering—not as a redemption for sin, but as a force for awakening our own inner strength. The title of this book is *When You're Falling, Dive: Lessons in the Art of Living*. The author is Mark Matousek, who for ten years stared down the gun barrel of HIV awaiting his death sentence, until on April Fool's Day, 1996, his doctor informed him that a treatment for the virus had been discovered. He then began interviewing others who had endured incredible suffering and fear. He calls them "survival artists."

Among them is Rachel Naomi Remen, whose healing words and inspiring work with cancer patients are described in her bestselling book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. Rachel Remen herself has suffered for more than fifty years from Crohn's disease, an autoimmune disorder of

the intestine that has restricted her life choices and robbed her of vision in one eye. Her personal experiences have endowed her with a wisdom that both includes and transcends her own suffering. “When we try to avoid loss or plow through our pain,” she told Mark Matousek, “our lives are actually diminished. On the other hand, there’s an extraordinary wisdom and clarity that emerges in people who meet their pain, not in theory but in life.” She offers the example of women giving birth, who find themselves surrendering to a life force that somehow includes and transcends their own physical suffering. ““An awareness of something larger breaks through,” she says. ‘There’s a core identity shift, not just in ideas about yourself but how you see the entire world.’

“Working with cancer patients all these years, Rachel has witnessed this identity shift quite frequently. ‘I’ve often seen that the body can be quite diminished while this other identity has expanded greatly. . . . The *individual* has expanded. . . . And the top priority is never what you thought it would be. It’s never about perfection or power. It always turns out to be about love.’” [Matousek, pp. 211-12]

William Murry says, “The answer to the problem of suffering is not to be found in traditional religion or in the creation of a brilliant new metaphysical system that explains why we suffer. The answer is to be found in human warmth and compassion and caring, in our love for one another, a love that includes responsible action on behalf of others and a love of the world.” [A *Faith for All Seasons*, p. 81] I have witnessed these responses to suffering time after time in our Fellowship. Through our Caring Network, we offer tangible and intangible support to those in our extended Fellowship family who have suffered from illness or injury. Through our Social Action Committee, we strive to change the conditions that perpetuate suffering in our local and global communities. We cannot deny the reality of suffering in the world, nor can we justify it. We can only respond to it with courage and conviction and hope.

Elie Wiesel is a Holocaust survivor who has devoted his life to preventing the recurrence of the most devastating example of deliberately planned mass suffering in human history. In discussing the significance of the 9/11 attacks, he told Mark Matousek, ““I would not say that from horror comes goodness. That would be giving horror too much credit. But goodness

prevails in spite of horror.’ ‘That’s amazing in itself,’ says Matousek. ‘And finally we must have hope,’ replies Wiesel. ‘Did you have hope when you were in Auschwitz?’ asks Matousek. Quoting Albert Camus, Elie Wiesel replies, ‘Even when there is no hope, we must invent it.’”

[Matousek, p. 278] Let me close with a poem by Max Coots from his book *Seasons of the Self*:

When did we ever learn that life was always Summertime and Spring and harvest time?
 When was it that someone guaranteed a year of twelve Julys, complete with everlasting picnics and never-ending potato salads?
 What sort of quaint, mistaken almanac said Spring could come without December—
 That life was all June—that May and August go on forever?
 Even Winter in ourselves may be the poor soul’s fertilizer,
 And Spring within can come only if some Winter has come first—
 Can come, if something like a seed is kept alive through wintering, to sprout and grow.
 Like earth, we have our seasons too.

[Max Coots, *Seasons of the Self*, p. 24]

To me, the meaning of suffering is found within our own hearts and the hearts of those who are willing to share the most difficult parts of our journey with compassion and caring.

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 1002 “Comfort Me”

CLOSING WORDS # 692