

A Theology of Pain and Suffering  
A sermon preached by the Reverend Diane D. Teichert  
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
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In Ralph Waldo Emerson's address to the Harvard Divinity School's graduates of 1838, many of them future Unitarian ministers, he railed against bad preaching.

He said, "I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more... A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine... The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life — life passed through the fire of thought."

I recalled this quote about true preaching as "life passed through the fire of thought" last summer. I was coming to terms with the meaning for me of the suffering in a loved one's life. When its meaning finally came to me, it was so simple and obvious, as truths usually are. But I had struggled so, through tears of sorrow and bouts of worry, to get there, that I thought, this is Emersonian sermon material, for my new congregation! My life, passed through the fire of thought!

Except that it would be a very short sermon.

Short, you see, because I decided that the only purpose of suffering is to elicit love from others. It doesn't take long to explain. Love is always the good that can come from pain and suffering.

But, let me elaborate. It's too early to end!

The purpose of pain and suffering is not punishment. Its purpose is not to teach us a lesson, though we are wise to learn from it. It doesn't prove that we are bad any more than being lucky proves we are good. True, our lifestyles and choices may result in our suffering, but it is rarely—dare I say never?—helpful to ask: what did I do to *deserve* this or that?

It doesn't help much to take pain and suffering personally, as I did in a journal entry last July, writing about the illness which caused my mother to suddenly become blind just a few days short of her June retirement. I wrote that it seemed like "unfathomable, cruel, unwarranted punishment of a woman who lived a good and generous life."

By then, I had been grieving, done quite a bit of weeping and was just feeling incredibly sorrowful about her losses. It was time to get a grip and discover the meaning of it, before I went further down that weepy road to depression and despair.

At that time, I was reading the new book by a favorite Christian author and minister, Barbara Brown Taylor. Called *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, it presents twelve different "practices" which she feels are spiritual yet are distinctly of this world—including the familiar like "paying attention" and "living with purpose" and the not-so-frequently heard from the pulpit like "the practice of wearing skin" about honoring the wisdom from one's body. Good stuff!

The practice about which I most looked forward to reading was "The Practice of Feeling Pain." But, that chapter proved disappointing. She discussed how our own physical pain and suffering can be spiritual gifts in the long run, but had said very little about what I was grappling with: how to make sense of the pain and suffering in the life of a loved one.

Taylor did have at least one good paragraph, about pain-induced growth. She writes, "If you ever have made a graph of your life—writing your date of birth at the left side of a page and today's date at the right, filling in the major events that have made you who you are—then you are likely to note that the spikes in your pain bear some relationship to the leaps in your growth. It was when your family moved for the fourth time in five years that you learned to enjoy your own company in the months before you made new friends at school. It was when your partner left you that you remembered what else you meant to do in your life beyond just staying together. It was when the doctor called about the spot on your lung that you finally made up with your sister. These are not the ways you would have chosen to become more than you were, but they worked. Pain burned up the cushions you used to keep from hitting bottom. Pain popped your clutch and shot you into the next gear. Pain landed you flat in bed, giving you time to notice things you never slowed down enough to notice before."(p. 157).

"Whatever else [physical] pain does," Taylor also says, "it offers an experience of being human that is as elemental as birth, orgasm, love and death. Because it is so real, pain is an available antidote to unreality," by which she means it points you to what is most important in life in that very present moment and away from our usual preoccupations with the past and future, hurts, schedules, possessions, and annoyances. (p. 172).

Yes, people often do rise from the ashes like phoenix, eventually.

Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, our Unitarian Universalist seminary in California, tells the story of a man who had served in World War II and survived, the only soldier from that small town in Iowa to return alive. But when Lyle got off the train, "he was a ghost. In response to the music and the cheering crowd, he stared back, mutely. His blank face did not register recognition of anyone, not mother, sister or friend...

They took him home to the farm. He sat in the rocker in the parlor, wouldn't speak, didn't sleep, and would barely eat. No one in the town knew what was wrong. They just knew that his soul was lost somewhere.

His sister Maxine decided to keep him company. Whenever she could, she sat in the parlor with Lyle and talk. She'd tell him the news from the hardware store in town, or about the potluck at church, who was there, what dress each young woman wore. She'd tell him how the clean laundry had blown off the line and into the tomatoes that morning.

When she ran out of things to say, she'd just sit with him quietly, snapping beans or mending socks. Her brother was like a stone. No expression on his face. Rocking.

This went on for months. Then one night, late, after everyone else had gone to bed, she was sitting with Lyle, quietly knitting, when the eyes in his still face filled with tears. The tears spilled over and began to run down his face. Maxine noticed. She got up and put her arms around her brother. Held in his sister's embrace, Lyle began to cry full force, great gusts of sobbing, and Maxine held him. Then he began to talk. He talked of the noise, the cold, the smoke, the death of his buddies. And then he spoke of the camps, the mass graves, the smell. He talked all night. Maxine listened.

When the morning light came across the fields, she went to the kitchen and cooked him breakfast. He ate. Then he went out and did the farm's morning chores."

In telling this story to Rebecca, and about how years later Lyle and his wife collect food and blankets for the Mexican farm workers who winter in their town in Southern California, Maxine said, "We never thought Lyle would be the one to do something like that. We thought we'd lost him."

As Parker says about Lyle's story, "A traumatized human being was able to return to feeling, to speaking, and to the ordinary tasks of life because another person offered him her presence and was able to remain present to the account of terror and grief without turning away." (*Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, pp. 98-100).

This is what I meant when I said that the purpose of pain and suffering is to elicit love from others. Love is always the good that can come from pain and suffering. We can love in various ways. We can simply be present with another person's pain. Or our love can be instrumental, such as when we bring a meal to a family that mourns the death of a loved one or when we help someone pack up who has been foreclosed. Or it can be deeply intuitive, if we have the gift of being able to minister to someone's pain in a way that helps them move along a bit on their path toward healing. However it happens, love is always the good that can come from pain and suffering.

Unfortunately, I think, traditional Christian doctrine is sometimes interpreted to mean that pain and suffering is to be borne silently and that because Jesus suffered alone on the cross, his followers should bear their suffering alone, too. "Take up your cross and follow me."

Many battered women and abused children, many traumatized soldiers like Lyle, and many an aggrieved minority have internalized this message and have kept their suffering to themselves. Keeping secrets such as these prevents the true purpose of pain and suffering from being realized: how can others' love for us be elicited if no one knows about our suffering?

Furthermore, the traditional Christian doctrine states that God caused or allowed his only son to suffer a gruesome death in order that God might be reconciled to the whole world in its sinfulness; and that by this death, our sins are atoned.

This is one of the places I part way with Christian theology, even though the teachings and example of Jesus' life still speak meaningfully to me.

I believe Jesus was crucified because he was a revolutionary figure, not because people are imperfect. He was a threat to the Roman and some religious leaders of his time. He signified both the love he had for the people and his love of God by not reneging on the movement he was building when he sense imminent danger and by not recanting his views when captured.

His pain and suffering and ultimately death on a cross elicited such love from his followers, that they were energized to continue teaching, preaching and building the Jesus Movement after his death. But soon that movement was politicized and eventually it was institutionalized when Constantine adopted it as the Roman religion, and after that a theology emerged that served to subjugate the people.

Indeed, as the Unitarian Universalist seminary president Rebecca Parker writes in *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, "[If we imagine God to be] A God who punishes disobedience [we] will [learn] to obey and endure when it would be holy to protest and righteous to refuse to cooperate... We need a different image of God... [one] who delights in revolutionary disobedience and spirited protest." (p. 31).

Traditional Christian theology, which shapes cultural norms, leaves us with a question that is similar to the one which I've raised in this sermon, but it goes this way: if God is all powerful, why do innocent children and generous people suffer? This is the question addressed by the recent NY Times Bestseller *The Shack* by William Paul Young. It is a favorite among evangelical Christians. Maybe some of you have read it too?

I first heard about *The Shack* when I spent a week volunteering for the Obama campaign, a year ago exactly, in a blue-collar McCain-voting-but-Democratic suburb of Pittsburgh. I have many stories to tell from that week, including one involving a gun! But that's for another time.

Well, area campaign volunteers were recruited to staff a rally with Michele Obama. My job early that morning was to work the line of people waiting to get in, with a clipboard getting them to sign in and asking them to volunteer for the campaign too. I paired myself up with a personable, outgoing 30-ish African American man, an Iraq veteran, totally new to political work. It turned out quite a few of his church friends were in the line and after we got them to sign in on one of our clipboards, he asked them if they'd read *The Shack* and if not they should and it would change their lives and besides it was the next book their church book group was to read. I resolved I'd read it too!

It's a riveting novel about a family (white, we are left to presume, though it is never stated) whose youngest daughter, age 6, is kidnapped from their lakeside campsite while her father Mack and everyone else are rescuing her older siblings in a capsized canoe. Though the authorities do not find Missy's body, a bloody sundress is recovered in an old shack and she is presumed dead, and clues are found that connect her murder to three other little girls' deaths. What Mack comes to call The Great Sadness descends on and engulfs him. In his depression, he blames God and himself for Missy's death.

One day Mack finds in the family mail box a mysterious note signed "Papa," which is Mack's wife's favorite name for God. It invites him to get together at the old shack. Irresistibly drawn, he goes alone back to the shack where Missy's dress had been found. As

if in a dream, or possibly it *is* a dream, the shack becomes a lovely cottage in which he does indeed meet God—a triune God, in the form of a large black woman named Papa, a Latino man who introduces himself as Jesus and Sarayu who is Asian, dresses in diaphanous silk garments, and is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit. (Despite the divine diversity, this is not a Unitarian story!).

These three divine personages engage Mack in conversation and adventures through which he learns about his life, Missy's murder and God's role in human events. According to *The Shack*, God's role is to love all people but to also allow full human independence because, as Papa tells Mack, forced love is not true love.

It's a fantastic fantasy tale, to my mind, with some fun elements—for example, near the end, when God thinks Mack needs a father not a mother figure, God reverts to being a white man with silver-white hair, but it's pulled back into a pony tail, and he has a mustache and goatee! But even though the book is saddled with Trinitarian doctrine which even Mack admits he cannot understand—he says it turns his brain to "mush"—by the end of the tale, their holy ministry with him is effective, his depression lifts and when he returns to real life, he is someone who "lives life with simplicity and joy... who hopes for a new revolution, one of love and kindness..."

We don't need it to be as complicated as three gods in one. Being Unitarians, one god if any will do, and being Universalists, we believe the transforming power of love works in us all, not just Christians. All we really need to know is, in the words by the poet William Blake in the hymn we are about to sing, "Joy and woe are woven fine"...and that when we suffer: let it be known and allow love in, and when another suffers: its purpose is to elicit our love.

Amen