

Toward a Theology of Suffering

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Introduction: A Story of Intersections

As I write this essay, I begin with a sense of being utterly overwhelmed. First, I am writing in September 2020. The headlines are full of stories of human suffering. COVID-19. One million deaths globally. Black Lives Matter. White supremacy. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Aubrey, so many others. Climate change. Hurricanes. Windstorms. Wildfires. Pathological political divisiveness. Global distrust. Rising authoritarianism. The deaths of John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Debates about how schools can reopen. Iraq. Afghanistan. The opioid epidemic. And I haven't even begun to name my personal issues, the things that don't capture the attention of the press and yet weigh upon my heart and mind as powerfully as any of these other issues.

It is just so hard.

I am also profoundly aware that (1) I am not a theologian, and (2) it is arguable that more ink has been used to try and craft a theology of suffering than any other core tenet within the Christian tradition. What I do here may be viewed as a classic man-splaining exercise, where I assume the role of Cliff Claven (of "Cheers" fame) and pontificate in a manner that ultimately reveals my ignorance. I am certain we don't need another essay that tells us how to think about suffering. (I read several in preparing this piece.)

On the other hand, I take some comfort in the fact that no theologian has sufficiently addressed the question of suffering, thus I join my sisters and brothers from across the centuries in an effort to speak into the mystery of human suffering, provide something helpful, something that just might reduce the suffering of others. I come, as well, as one who has served with hundreds of chaplains and clinical pastoral education (CPE) educators who have found themselves rethinking the core of their practice, their understanding of pastoral presence. They, along with their congregational colleagues, have had to reimagine rituals for dying, death, and grief. They have pivoted from primarily caring for patients and their families to caring much more intentionally for staff, since patients have been isolated, family visits eliminated, and staff working exhausting schedules, overwhelmed by grief and fatigue as they strive to stay ahead of the virus.

In a sermon on Luke 21: 20-28, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The rules do not change in frightening times; they just get clearer. The proper response to disaster is to keep loving God and our neighbors as ourselves. The proper posture is to raise our heads... Either way, our calling is... to assist God in the deliverance of the world any and every way we can."¹ In our hospitals and hospice contexts, this has been the work of chaplains, physicians, nurses, allied health professionals, environmental service workers, and healthcare administrators in the midst of the pandemic. In our streets and neighborhoods, it has been the work of those who have marched and borne witness to racial injustice in the face of the senseless killing of African American brothers and sisters. In our communities, it has been the work of congregational leaders who, in ordinary times having so great a value on gathering together, have adapted to video,

drive by, and parking lot approaches to worship and spiritual care. In our daily lives, it is the invitation to each one of us as we strap on a mask for yet another day, check on a neighbor who lives alone whom we have not seen, or resist the temptations to embrace the latest conspiracy theory simply so we have a place to project our suffering and direct our anger. Deliver us, O God, even here, even now.

What Is Suffering?

So where does one begin? Any theology of suffering cannot be sufficiently explanatory; it must be exploratory. What I mean by this is simply that none of us can offer a fully satisfying rationale for why we suffer or why suffering exists. We have many beliefs and experiences of it, but if we were certain as to its purposes, there would be no need for this essay or any of the other efforts that have been offered through the years.

There are two claims we can make as we begin this effort. First, suffering is ubiquitous. Every human being suffers. “[Suffering] is composed of the roots *sub*, meaning ‘under,’ and *ferre*, meaning ‘to carry, bear.’ Thus suffering is what we carry, what we bear, and what we labor under. The experience of suffering is universal.”² Whether physically, emotionally, socially, or spiritually—and sometimes in all four domains—suffering is a part of human life. It cannot be escaped or simply ignored. It is something we all come to know in one way or another. We know it throughout our lives. From the earliest experiences of pain and separation to the cumulative experiences of older adulthood, suffering is with us throughout life’s journey.

The source of suffering is pain. Physical suffering is self-explanatory: the process of experiencing physical pain. Emotional pain (also known as psychological pain) “runs on the same neural tracks as physical pain,”³ though the source of pain is not from a physical source but rather psychological. Depression, grief, rejection, alienation, addiction, and many other forms of psychological distress or illness may lead to emotional suffering. While often inclusive of many forms of psychological suffering, “[s]ocial suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems.”⁴ Spiritual suffering (also referred to as spiritual pain or spiritual struggle) occurs when “some aspect of [religious/spiritual] belief, practice, or experience becomes a focus of negative thoughts or emotions, concern or conflict.”⁵

And yet—and this is the second point—no matter how similar the circumstances, consequences, implications, or variables, no individual experience of suffering is quite like another. There is a kind of particularity that is embodied within each of us. We can have empathy for the suffering of others, but we can never fully enter their experience because we cannot bring to bear all that they have known up to that moment. Thus, our suffering is never just about the moment itself, but it must be understood as the complex interweaving of a lifetime of experiences (no matter how young or old) that inform the pain we know right here, right now. It is not just an experience of our thoughts or our feelings; it is fully embodied, from our head to our toes.

Making Meaning of Suffering

The journey with suffering often begins with questions. Peter Trachtenberg in *The Book of Calamaties: Five Questions about Suffering and Its Meaning* explores

suffering both philosophically and experientially. Questions invite exploration as opposed to explanation. Each one is its own quest, a journey of discovery, a trek seeking insight, understanding, or solace. (Note: every question has the potential to launch a “quest.”) His questions are as follows:

- Why me?
- How do I endure?
- What is just?
- What does my suffering say about me? And what does it say about God?
- What do I owe those who suffer?

He writes, “Suffering is as common as death, and like death, it resists all attempts to explain it. Perhaps it is worse than death. We long for the dead to speak to us, but who wants to hear the suffering, even when they return, as they sometimes do, from the land of pain? Who wants to know what they know?”⁶ We can hear in his questions the old trope, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

These questions Trachetenberg raises invite a move towards integration, a shift from simply enduring pain to crafting what the pain means for our life. For many years, David Kessler worked with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, exploring the processes of grief. Recently, his research has led him to argue that there are not five but six stages. The sixth stage is what he describes as “meaning.” He writes, “It is in your control to find meaning every day. You can still love, laugh, grow, pray, smile, cry, live, give, be grateful, be present. You can take the other moments as they come. That can be the meaning. In the end, no matter how hard it is, if we allow ourselves to spend time searching for the meaning in our loss, it will appear because of our search and the healing will happen.”⁷

The same may be true of suffering. Meaningless suffering may be simply unbearable. Again, speaking of grief, Kessler writes,

The mind can be cruel in grief. Concentration camp survivors often talk about the horrific situations they had to endure. The physical suffering was unbearable. But they also talk about the internal suffering they experienced when they were unable to picture a future. The torture of not knowing when they would get out, if ever, was even worse than their other tortures. The thought of a future without a release date deprived them of any sense of purpose and condemned them to the horrors of the present. But as long as you are alive you have a future, and the promise of release from your current pain.⁸

Etty Hillesum offers a powerful example of Kessler’s argument. Etty lived in Rotterdam, Holland, in the 1940s. A young Jewish woman, she kept a journal where, on July 3, 1942, she wrote:

What they (the Nazis) are after is our total destruction. I accept it. I know it now and I shall not burden others with my fears. I shall not be bitter if others fail to grasp what is happening to us Jews. I work and continue to live with the same conviction, and I find life meaningful—yes, meaningful—although I hardly dare say so in company these days. Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the

house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors—it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole....⁹

Nine days later, she wrote directly to God, revealing not only a deep theological grounding but also her own resolution to the problem of human suffering in the realm of an all-loving God:

I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.¹⁰

Theological Meanings of Suffering

In her 2003 article “Facing Evil: Evil’s Many Faces,” Susan Nelson argues evil and suffering are interrelated: “Evil is an awareness of this disjuncture between the pronouncement that life is God’s good creation and the knowledge that suffering and violence are real and threaten not only life and health but also any sense of meaning, order, and blessing. Evil is the experience of suffering, misery, death, and the accompanying fear that such suffering undermines any hope of meaning and order in the world or of a God who exercises providential care.”¹¹ She provides five theological paradigms that she identifies from within the Christian tradition that are intended to provide people of faith with responses to evil in their lives and the world:

1. A moral view, i.e., evil is the consequence of human sin;
2. Radical suffering, i.e., suffering is utterly meaningless and can only be endured;
3. Ambiguous creation, i.e., sin, evil, and pain are a part of creation and thus suffering is its consequence;
4. Eschatological imagination, i.e., while radical suffering exists, it is our moral obligation to resist it and in so doing to strive to bring about God’s reign;
5. Redemptive suffering, i.e., some suffering can be engaged to bring about redemption: personal, communal, societal, etc.

Nelson notes that these views may overlap and inform one another in the meaning-making process. In my experience, it is often the kind of suffering—physical, emotional, social, or spiritual—that may lead one to one frame as opposed to another.¹²

Barbara Brown Taylor highlights how distinctive the Christian approach to suffering is among other faith traditions: “Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, even among Christians.

We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy of them—not from a distance but right up close.”¹³ For Christians, it is a mistake, however, if we seek to understand suffering and God suffering with us solely through Jesus' final hours and death on the cross. The gospels offer us dozens of invitations to find communion with Jesus, his family, the disciples, the leaders, his opponents, and so many others in the larger narrative of his life. Why else did an angel need to visit Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, and Zechariah if not to ease their suffering as they faced the news of births beyond explanation and all that they might portend? What about Mary Magdalene, Zaccheus, Jairus and his daughter, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha? Didn't they know something about suffering, and didn't Jesus meet them in the midst of it? What about those unnamed sufferers who came to Jesus seeking healing? Didn't they find not just a new wholeness through their encounter with Jesus but also the kind of communion that transformed all that they knew? All of these experiences inform what becomes the passion week. The suffering of the community that Jesus loves cannot be separated from his suffering and those of his community, even unto the cross.

Towards a Theology of Suffering or Hope?

In her masterful work *Suffering*, Dorothee Soelle argues there are two two-part questions Christians must ask about suffering: “Question one is: ‘What are the causes of suffering, and how can these conditions be eliminated?’ It is related to question two: ‘What is the meaning of suffering and under what conditions can it make us more human?’”¹⁴ I've attempted to address the first three parts of these questions, and I would like to conclude by exploring the final phrase: under what conditions can suffering make us more human?

First, suffering solely for the sake of suffering is not wise or warranted. Mukherjee writes, “Into every life some suffering must come. It is an essential feature of being human. What we can choose, though, is how we relate to that suffering.... It is up to us whether we suffer neurotically or, using Jung's terminology, ‘legitimately.’”¹⁵ In other words, we will know pain—physical, emotional, social, and/or spiritual. How we choose to respond makes all the difference.

When I think back to 2019 and all of the plans, initiatives, and marketing efforts that used phrases celebrating 2020 as a time of clear vision, I cannot help but feel deep sadness by how disorienting the last year has been. We have experienced the full range of responses to suffering in our country and our world: from silent withdrawal to public protest, from glimpses of solidarity and support to deep divisiveness and hostility. Canadian Actress Julie Nolke created a video series where her future self shares with her present self what is coming, with a mix of profane humor and profound grief.¹⁶ We laugh, not because what she shares is necessarily funny, but because we stand with her in a state of incredulity at where we are and fear of what is to come. We laugh at the absurdity of it all, even as we strive for means of coping within it. Perhaps finding sources of laughter we can come together to remind one another that the cumulative pain of 2020 will not define us, that we are committed to Life.

Second, while suffering may lead one to want to withdraw, the journey towards meaning-making is often a sojourn with others. Even Job was accompanied by his

misguided friends. When we reach our most painful moments, sharing the story of that experience is often the first step in the meaning-making process. Taylor writes, “There is a strange kind of comfort in a story that tells the absolute truth about how bad things can get—that spares no details and takes no prisoners. You can trust a story like that a whole lot better than you can trust one that has been all prettied up. Plus, the very fact that someone is telling it means you are not alone. Someone else has been there. Someone else knows what it is like, and that company—that communion—can make all the difference.”¹⁷ Kessler agrees, noting that there are times in intense pain where we need to “set down the mirror and pick up the binoculars.”¹⁸ Even though no one will have quite the same experience, the world of suffering is inhabited by us all, and we can accompany one another in the quest towards a new sense of peace.

Of course, the pandemic has required so many to be together apart. Quarantine and isolation have meant we cannot practice presence in the ways that are considered best practice, a condition that creates a particular kind of suffering. This has been especially true for chaplains, pastors, and spiritual care professionals. “We run towards suffering,” said the Rev. Amani Legagneur, manager of spiritual health and education for the Northside Hospital System. “We want to be there, regardless of how painful what we encounter may be. We’re not averse to really difficult challenges.” But in these times, we can’t, both for the safety of others and for our own. “We had to step back and look at this strategically. It was more ethical not to be present so as not to bring the battle to the nurses, the doctors, and other patients by possibly being vectors for this disease.”¹⁹ In this moment, spiritual care givers have demonstrated a remarkable nimbleness, adapting what was seen as best practice to use whatever they could—iPads, grease pencils on windows, posters, even good old land lines—to help people hear voices of support, to see faces that reminded them that they are not alone.

Third, the Lenten Season offers an opportunity to hold suffering, to let it be present in ways that much of the year ignores, avoids, or rejects it. This holding is not wallowing; it is a courageous step into the pain that lies at its source, buoyed by a transcendent hope that provides a light to follow in this dark night of the soul. The Lenten journey invites us onto that path described by Paul in Romans 5, the one where suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. I can imagine a sermon series that addresses each of these terms, proceeding towards Easter with its witness to the resurrection, perhaps the most profound hope we can know.

In this moment, more than anything else, I simply want and need reassurance that there is an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, that we can build a society where racial equity is a norm instead of an exception, where even when we disagree fiercely with one another, we commit to constructive dialogue, seeking answers that are committed to the common good. And while scripture grounds my faith, it is in music that I find solace, that I find not only a theology of suffering but also a promise that suffering does not have the last word. Carrie Newcomer’s song, “You Can Do This Hard Thing,” has become the anthem many of us have turned to with its reassurance and invitation to resilience:

There at the table
With my head in my hands,
A column of numbers
I just could not understand.
You said, "Add these together,
Carry the two,
Now you."

You can do this hard thing.
You can do this hard thing.
It's not easy I know,
But I believe that it's so.
You can do this hard thing.

At a cold winter station,
Breathing into our gloves,
This would change me forever.
Leaving for God knows what,
You carried my bags.
You said, I'll wait
For you."

You can do this hard thing.
You can do this hard thing.
It's not easy I know,
But I believe that it's so.
You can do this hard thing.

Late at night I called,
And you answered the phone.
The worst it had happened,
And I did not want to be alone.
You quietly listened,
You said, "We'll see this thru."

You can do this hard thing.
You can do this hard thing.
It's not easy I know,
But I believe that it's so.²⁰

No theology of suffering is complete without this reminder: you can do this hard thing. Thanks be to God.

Notes

1 Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 85.

2 Sushmita Mukherjee, "Sitting with Suffering: A Task for Spiritual Companions," *Presence: An Inter-*

national Journal of Spiritual Direction 26, no. 2 (2020), 26.

3 N. I. Eisenberger, "Does Rejection Hurt? An fMRI Study of Social Exclusion," *Science* 302, no. 5643 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1089134>, 292.

4 Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, and Margaret M. Lock, *Social Suffering* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2010), ix.

5 Julie J. Exline, et al., "The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Development and Initial Validation," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6, no. 3 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036465>, 208.

6 Peter Trachtenberg, *The Book of Calamities: Five Questions about Suffering and Its Meaning* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 415.

7 David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: the Sixth Stage of Grief* (New York, NY: SCRIBNER, 2020), 111.

8 Ibid., 70.

9 Stephanie Kroner, "Etty Hillesum, 'Life Is Beautiful, In Spite of Everything,'" Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, November 3, 2015, <https://uucb.org/etty-hillesum-life-is-beautiful-in-spite-of-everything/>.

10 Ibid.

11 Susan L. Nelson, "Facing Evil: Evil's Many Faces," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 57, no. 4 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430005700405>, 399.

12 Ibid.

13 Taylor, *God in Pain*, 118.

14 Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering: translated by Everett R. Kalin* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), Kindle Edition, Locations 63-64.

15 Mukherjee, "Sitting with Suffering," 26.

16 Julie Nolke, "Explaining the Pandemic to My Future Self" (YouTube), accessed September 28, 2020, <https://youtu.be/Ms7capx4Cb8>.

17 Taylor, *God in Pain*, 107.

18 Kessler, *Finding Meaning*, 74.

19 Sheila Poole, "Hospital Chaplains Adjust to the New Normal with COVID-19," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.ajc.com/news/local/hospital-chaplains-adjust-the-new-normal-with-covid/t3eE85subTiMpOtaJ9xcCZP/>.

20 Carrie Newcomer, "Lyrics," Carrie Newcomer, 2016, <https://www.carrienewcomer.com/lyrics>, "The Beautiful Not Yet."