

“There Is Suffering”

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First Reading

From the Buddhist teacher Ajahn Sumedho, in his anthology *Seeds of Understanding*.

An understanding of suffering is an important insight. Contemplate this experience in your own life. How much of your life is spent trying to avoid or get away from things that are unpleasant or unwanted? How much energy in our society is dedicated to happiness and pleasure, trying to get away from those unpleasant and unwanted things? We can have instant happiness, instant absorption, something we call non-suffering: excitement, romance, adventure, sensual pleasure, eating... whatever. But all this is an attempt to get away from our own fears, discontentments, anxiety and worry.

Suffering has to be realized, made real in our mind; it has to be made a fully conscious experience. You're in a very limited condition, an earthbound body. A body is subject to pain, to pleasure, to heat and cold; it gets old and senses fade; it has illness, and then it dies.

As long as we don't know the cycles of birth and death, as long as we don't understand ourselves...we're going to suffer. When we start suffering enough we suddenly ask, "Why am I suffering?" That's when we suddenly awaken.

Second Reading

From the book *Focusing*, by Eugene T. Gendlin.

What is true is already so. Owning up to it doesn't make it worse. Not being open about it doesn't make it go away. And because it's true, it is what is there to be interacted with. Anything untrue isn't there to be lived. People can stand what is true, for they are already enduring it.

Sermon/Homily: “There Is Suffering”

On this Mother's Day I am remembering my maternal grandmother, Bernice. My grandma had a hard life. Her mother died when my grandma was just 14, and as the oldest of her siblings, she assumed a lot of responsibility. And she and her siblings had a stepmother right out of the Grimm's Fairy Tales.

When my grandma became a mother, that was also hard. She was divorced with a baby, my mom, in 1942, a time when divorce was not common or acceptable, and divorced women were seen as “damaged goods.”

And yet, my grandma was joyful. She laughed easily, she danced when she could, and she loved with a wide-open heart. She lived the wisdom that we don’t have to be free of suffering in order to allow ourselves joy.

Today’s sermon is about suffering. This is the topic requested by the couple who purchased the sermon in last year’s auction. It’s a tradition here and elsewhere that, as part of the annual auction, the minister offers a sermon on a mutually agreeable topic. I’ve offered this item again this year, and it will be auctioned off at the dinner next Saturday. I hope to see you there.

The questions I was asked to address in this sermon are: Do people choose to suffer? Is suffering redemptive? Is the purpose of spiritual practice to alleviate suffering? How do we know when to be with suffering, rather than trying to fix it? All meaningful and juicy questions; fodder for several sermons. Here’s my thoughts about suffering. I invite you to consider your own answers to these questions. I think they are worthy of serious pondering.

Every faith tradition addresses suffering in some way. Suffering is part of the human condition, a shared experience of every person who lives. The questions posed may be, “Why do hard things happen?” Or, “What is my response when hard things happen?” But, to the extent that a faith tradition acknowledges our human experience, it offers some kind of guidance, teaching, or practice related to suffering.

One of the most direct teachings about suffering comes from the Buddhist tradition, reflected in our readings today. The Buddha taught four Noble Truths; these are truths that invite us to rise to the challenge of understanding our humanity. The First Noble Truth is simply “There is suffering.” This truth acknowledges that, as humans, we all experience dissatisfaction, disappointment, discontent, loss, despair, disease, sorrow, doubt, fear. We have many names for suffering.

And Buddhism makes a distinction between kinds of suffering. There is the suffering that comes from birth, sickness, old age and death, the suffering of pain, the grief of loss. That’s just the nature of life in this world.

Then there’s the suffering that we create out of ignorance, not understanding, and not knowing or facing what is real. It’s the suffering of wanting things to be different than they are, from holding on to something that is changing and wanting it to stay the same, of not wanting to face any of the pain of living. And, while we do experience physical and emotional pain, even more suffering comes from our reaction to that pain. When we react to pain with fear or anger, the suffering is worse. When we acknowledge what is, the pain is still present, but our mind can be more at ease and our suffering not as acute.

I think that’s where choice comes in related to suffering. We can’t choose if we get ill or have an accident, and we certainly can’t choose whether we will ever die. We can choose how we

respond to the suffering of life. And we can choose whether we seek to understand suffering, our own and others.

For example, there are many reasons that we might choose to do things that are bad for us—not eat veggies or not move our bodies. In my experience, those aren't choices to suffer, those are choices to fill a more immediate need for gratification or something else. And, sometimes what might appear to be a choice to suffer is based on fear and avoidance of uncertainty. For example, there's been a lot of research on why people might stay in abusive relationships if they have a choice to leave. The reasons are complicated and encompass human psychology as well as the reality of our social systems and culture. Wanting to suffer is rarely part of that complexity. The power of choice is in our willingness to understand the suffering and how it is impacting our lives.

You might ask, “Don't some people believe that they or others deserve to be punished? Don't some people believe that suffering serves a purpose? Isn't suffering redemptive; can't suffering save us?”

In cultures that have been informed by Christianity, like our US culture, there is a story that suffering is redemptive, that we can be saved in some way by suffering. It's one story of Jesus' death—that he died to save us; Jesus died for our sins. It's a story that was told in some faith communities at Easter just a few weeks ago. It is an ancient story and one that has been debated and discarded by many liberal faith traditions, including many Unitarian Universalists. Many UUs find meaning in the life of Jesus rather than the death of Jesus.

The stories we have of Jesus' life are stories of healing; healing sickness and, in the story of Lazarus, reversing death. Jesus' life was also about healing the ills of society—inequity, bias, hierarchy, and abuse of power. His death can be viewed as a political act by those in power because his message was dangerous; his message of unity, equity, and sharing power was a threat to ancient power structures. Some would say Jesus' message is just as relevant today, and perhaps just as threatening to those in power.

For the past 50 years, African American and feminist theologians have researched and reflected on the story that Jesus' suffering and death was redemptive. In 1973, William Jones wrote Is God a White Racist? In this provocative book, Jones, a black theologian, argues that theology can be used for oppression: Jesus suffered, so it is fine that other people suffer, too; suffering is holy. Jones asks, “What kind of God would require that black people suffer so they could be saved in the next life?”

In 2009, Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock wrote Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire. They argue that the history of Christianity shows the movement away from the original teachings of Jesus and toward power. They recover the history that the story of Jesus' suffering for our salvation wasn't told until 1000 years after Jesus' death and was created for political reasons. Parker & Brock ask, “What kind of God would teach that suffering is salvation and violence is holy?”

It isn't by chance that black and feminist theologians have taken on this deconstruction; the idea that suffering is redemptive has been used for centuries to justify violence and oppression. Those who suffer from the effects of unjust laws and systems are told that they should expect to suffer, even relish their suffering, because Jesus suffered to save us. The oppressed are told that their suffering has meaning and will save them, just as Jesus' suffering saved us. It is a distorted view of violence and salvation used to justify inequality. Whether it's Jim Crow or misogyny, it's control over and exploitation of many for the benefit of a few.

Maybe about now you're thinking that this all sounds contradictory, or at least confusing. Yep. I think suffering has several paradoxes.

The first paradox of suffering is that in order to alleviate suffering, our own and others, we must rise up to the Buddha's challenge to understand suffering. In order to get some relief from suffering, we must lean into it.

This is where spiritual practice comes in. A spiritual practice helps us know and face what is real. It might be meditation from the Buddhist tradition or prayer from the Christian tradition, or something else. The purpose of spiritual practice is neither to cause suffering nor to alleviate suffering. The purpose of spiritual practice is to be awake. It's to help us know what is true, and to build our strength to be with whatever is.

A recent example is Ramadan, which just ended this past week. During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from food and drink from sunup to sundown. Is there suffering? Sure. Hunger pains. Feeling thirsty. A foggy brain. Fatigue. But the purpose of fasting during Ramadan is not to suffer. The purpose is to focus on relationship with God and on relationship to neighbors. Fasting helps focus so we can know what is real and true.

In addition, the purpose of spiritual practice is not to alleviate suffering. Some meditation practitioners say that the purpose of meditation is not to make us calm or peaceful, but to help us wake up. A byproduct of being awake may be that it helps us live with our pain and lessen our suffering, but that is not the intent. I know from my own practice that sometimes meditation is anything but calming and peaceful, but I am usually more aware of what is real and true, however painful that may be at times.

Spiritual practice gives us some distance so we can get perspective. It helps us know our minds and, when needed, change them. When we change our minds, we can change how we act. We must understand suffering so we can decide the right action.

That leads us to the second paradox: we must both live with suffering and try to change or lessen it.

There is suffering. We cannot control all illness or disease, we can't prevent all accidents, we cannot prevent death. We can learn about disease and illness in order to prevent what we can. This is what we are experiencing now with COVID—learning, understanding, and doing what we can. We can prevent some accidents or minimize the injury. Consider seat belts and bike helmets. We can ease the passage to death with palliative care and hospice. This is the work of

science, of medicine, of caregiving; this is the work of love.

We cannot change that there are differences between people in this world. Claiming that we are all the same dismisses the reality that difference is part of nature and is a strength in any ecosystem. We can understand and change laws, systems and culture that say difference is bad, that there is only one way, and that some are better than others.

In an anti-racism training that I attended last year, a local colleague said, "I don't need white people to feel guilty and to suffer—that just creates more suffering. I need white people to change things." This is the work of justice.

Another way to approach this paradox is to notice who is assigning meaning to the suffering. When someone with privilege says to someone with less power that the suffering caused by their oppression is holy and will save them, I'd name that violence. Or to paraphrase black theologian William Jones, it's the theology of a God unworthy of our worship.

But, if someone assigns meaning to their own suffering, well that is something different. If a person who is suffering finds inspiration and solidarity in the suffering of others, even in the suffering of Jesus, perhaps that can lessen their suffering and give it meaning.

We can ask, "Who is deciding that suffering has meaning, and what that meaning is?"

The third and final paradox of suffering is that we suffer because we are connected. But the alleviation of suffering is not disconnection; it's more connection. One example is the suffering of grief. In the past 10 days we've celebrated the lives of two beloved OUUC elders who have died. We mourn, we grieve because we loved them. Grief is the price of love. But the antidote to grief is not to disconnect, to never love or care. The antidote to grief is to mourn together. One of the ways that pain becomes suffering is when the pain is so overwhelming that we believe we are alone. That's why our rituals of mourning are so important. We gathered in community to hold each other in our loss, to acknowledge that the cost of love is loss, and to re-learn that we are not alone. In each service we laughed, we cried, we told stories, we made music. That is the power of a faith community. That's the power of love.

Poet Ocean Vuong (Wong) recently released a book titled Time Is A Mother. This is a collection of poems he's written since losing his mother to cancer. In a recent interview, he spoke about the power of turning loss into art. He said:

I think it's the job description. And a lot of folks ask me, "How can you be so vulnerable in your work? How can you look at difficult histories — personal and political and historical — and keep going? How do you take care of yourself?" And I said, "I signed up for this." I don't think it's a burden to look at everything that is human, the joys and the difficulty. This is the task at hand, to not turn away from the light and the dark, and that is the poet's job.

This is the challenge and the power of our humanity. That is our job as humans, to know all of what is real, to know what is true, and to live it all.

There is loss. There is suffering. There is beauty. There is joy.

May we embrace the whole of our humanity.

May we live the wisdom of my grandmother that even in the midst of suffering, we can experience joy.

May this be so.