

“Why Do We Suffer?”

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dick Weston-Jones on February 24, 2008
For The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC**

A Conversation Between Billy Graham and God

Many years ago the MGM Hotel in Las Vegas was destroyed in a spectacular fire. Billy Graham marked the occasion with a prime time special telecast from the scene of the calamity to answer the question “Why Does God Allow Suffering?”

That question has tormented people from the dawn of consciousness. Religious people who want to believe in fairness and a god who is good keep asking it. Some who started with the question gave up on the elaborate theological explanations they heard from preachers only to fall into a world of meaninglessness.

I missed Billy’s show but I can imagine he might have had a conversation with God beforehand in which he would have asked the ultimate question. It might have gone like this:

“God, I don’t want you to think I’m being forward, but can you please let me know why you let it happen?”

“Don’t be shy, Billy. Ask anything you want. Let what happen?”

“Suffering, God. Like that fire. And all the other suffering too, like the children who are dying every minute from starvation. And the victims of war, and the sick in hospitals. And...”

“Now hold on Billy. What makes you think I did that? I’ve been up here in heaven all this time.”

“God, I don’t need an alibi. I just want to know why you let it happen, being all-powerful and omniscient. Why do you let it happen?”

“I let everything happen, Billy. I let the rocks just lie there and the trees spring up out of the earth, and people roam at will, and I let the animals live anywhere they want—though they’re finding that harder and harder to do these days. I don’t just let suffering happen, Billy, I let everything happen.”

“Yes God, but it’d be nicer if you’d let up a little on the suffering. I mean you set it up and we could do without some of it. Or perhaps you could give us a good reason for it all.”

“Listen Billy, I just created it. The reason department is your business. That’s why I gave you brains, a conscience and feelings.”

“You mean that you gave us suffering so we could think about it, God? And that would lead us to you?”

“Billy, asking ‘why’ is your business, not mine. I’m in the creating business. You’re in the meaning business. I don’t tinker with you and you don’t tinker with me. I gave you everything that is, that’s all.”

“But what if we come up with the wrong answers, God? Won’t you tell us why we suffer? What’s it for?”

“Billy, your answers are always wrong and always right to me, whatever they are. Don’t you understand? That’s your business. You’re the meaning-maker. I just make worlds and universes. You oughta see the one I put together out in Andromeda. I’ve got this crazy, brainy fish out there that’s asking the same questions you are.”

“You really mean that, God? A fish? With brains like us? What does all this mean?”

“Billy, this is final. The meaning business is your business. I’m into creating. Everything! That’s all! Mind your own business.”

Well, that’s the way I think that conversation might have gone. But it wouldn’t really help us regardless of what Billy made of it. Because God was right. It is our business to try to make sense of everything. It’s really hard with suffering, if you believe in fairness.

SERMON

Why do we suffer? That’s an important question for many people and a profoundly personal one for everyone. The answer has to come out of the life of the person asking it. Depending upon how she answers it she may find hope and meaning and maturity, or become filled with depression and bitterness and hopelessness.

The individual creates the meaning of an event by how she defines it, even when she doesn’t think she has any choice at all about its meaning. Napoleon III, the last of the Napoleonic emperors to rule France, was asked by his son to explain the difference between an accident and a misfortune. Napoleon, who expected his son to succeed him on the throne, replied with an answer about another possible heir to the throne: “If your cousin Plon-Plon were to fall into a well, that would be an accident;” he said. “If someone pulled him out, that would be a misfortune,”¹

Viktor Frankl, a Viennese psychoanalyst who survived years in a Nazi concentration camp, later built a psychotherapeutic theory out of the choice between sinking into bitterness, and accepting responsibility for creating meaning in the present moment, no matter how painful it is.

In his book From Death Camp to Existentialism, Frankl said some prisoners in very poor medical condition survived while others in decent physical health did not. It was not uncommon to see a person give up hope, lie down and die in a matter of hours. Many who held on to believing they had a purpose in living, found in it a reason for survival and lived. They chose survival while others chose to surrender to their bitterness, and died.

Few of us will be so tested in our lives, but all of us will suffer. Our suffering isn’t created by the magnitude of its cause. The suffering is personal. It’s always personal. So is its meaning.

Suffering that appears to have no physical cause may be the greatest suffering of all—going through the loss of a loved one or the loss of a valued relationship, feeling that you’ve failed in the eyes of others who are important to you or your own eyes, guilt for doing too little or too much or the wrong thing or even for not being sure. Feeling anger at others whose actions you don’t like. Feeling that no one else really cares. Loneliness.

Each of these experiences requires the sufferer to make a choice. She has to take the suffering into her life and be transformed by it, either choosing to move on with hope or choosing to be filled with despair. But the sadness cannot be avoided if she wants to move beyond it.

There’s always a choice. It’s there each day anew even when you’ve felt only despair before. You can decide to hope. It’s not your power to change things that defines the meaning of them, but your decision to be who you want after you take the full depth of the issue into yourself.

In his psychotherapy Frankl helped his clients focus on an aspect of their lives that was important to them, or on persons who were important, or on unfulfilled plans tugging on them. The life of the sufferer always has importance for another person or for an unfulfilled goal, if not for herself.

If she remembers that, hope seeps into the sufferer’s life until she begins generating the will to survive again. If that’s unrealistic, even the choice to accept death may give a life meaning. In the state of Oregon the people voted to support the right of those facing death from a painful terminal illness to set the moment of their death with dignity, with a doctor’s help rather than being forced to let it drag out.

Is suffering ever good? Henry Nelson Wieman said in The Source of Human Good that it is. He said “suffering, even more than happiness, leads to that kind of communication whereby creativity increases the good of life. Certainly, the intermixture of suffering and happiness rather than happiness without suffering is required for this.”²

Wieman, the outstanding Unitarian philosopher of religion of the twentieth century, believed that what he called “Creative Interchange” is the source of all real improvement in life. He thought it was so important that he called it a “Divine Event.”

Creative Interchange necessitates suffering, he said. “The legends and ... folklore, the art and... story, the recorded history and... celebrations of a people are almost always communications about past events in which suffering has played a considerable part.”³

Where would the Jews be without their tragic history that leads back thousands of years, a history of suffering that gave them the responsibility to carry on as Jewish sufferers in the past did? Too bitter a suffering may destroy people, as it is in the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians today. But some suffering is necessary to stimulate in survivors the will to be creative and to build healthy lives.

Many years ago a University of California social scientist, Frank Barron, conducted studies showing that the perception of suffering is a necessary element in creativity. He surveyed several population groups, asking people to say who among their peers they considered to be the most creative. Then he took the personal histories of those people.

He found that a very high percentage of those named as the most creative felt that they had had unhappy childhoods even when their parents disagreed with them.

“Oh, I had such a painful childhood,” the remembering adult says.

“You did not. Don’t tell such lies.”

“I did, mother. Don’t you remember?”

“Not that way, I don’t. You were such a happy child.”

“Was not! I remember what it was like!”

There may be a reality problem there, but the suffering of those who are creative is real, even when their mothers remember it differently. Had the sense that they were unhappy as children made these people creative? Or had their greater sensitivity as creative people led them to suffer from causes that would not have caused pain to others? I don’t know, but I think the report of the self-evaluations is significant. Suffering appears to be allied with strength. The ability to suffer and to know that one is suffering allows one to become a stronger and more creative person.

Do you have to suffer to grow? I don’t think so. Sometimes growth brings joy, but I doubt if people who are determined not to feel pain, are likely to grow much.

I remember my own childhood as a time of idyllic play and torturous pain, of winters in a secure home and summers taken at abandon as only children can. No one kept a tight watch on me then, and I ran free in the woods and swam in the ocean. It was delicious.

I remember how that joyful feeling of freedom changed into feeling abandoned when my father went in the Navy in World War II. My mother and I became homeless when the parsonage we lived in was given to another family; I experienced the cruel taunting of neighborhood kids as we frequently moved from town to town, depending on friends to take us in.

As an adult I remember the suffering when my first marriage ended and how it kept coming back later when least expected to gnaw at my self-respect. I remember how few defenses I had to ward off that suffering.

How difficult it was at those times to feel that suffering was good for anything! Yet it has changed me into who I am and am becoming. The caring and support I received from others, while significant, wasn't enough to neutralize the pain. I had to accept myself with that history and no excuses, with nowhere to go beyond myself to find validation for my life. Caring friends help but they can't do your work for you, suffer for you or bring you into your hope and freshness. Each of us suffers alone.

Wieman claimed that suffering is always associated with meaning. Physical pain may be the easiest to endure. Emotional pain goes deeper. Physical "pain may add no qualitative meaning to the world and frequently diminishes it by hypnotically focusing the mind upon the quality of the present event of pain to the exclusion of all else."⁴ However when, for example, a loved one dies, said Wieman, "it is not the bare event of death that generates the sorrow. It is the meaning of that event. The meaning...is that I shall no longer be able to communicate"⁵ with that person. A piece of you has been taken away, never to return.

Wieman identified a number of ways in which a mature person is enhanced by suffering. He said she may put everything she has under the control of what he called "Creative Good" to allow it to transform her in any way it requires. That may involve losing things that gave her pleasure while she goes on pursuing new goals that become more important to her.

If the loss requires hearing the criticism of others she can change when she sees the hard evidence behind the criticism. Accepting disagree-able facts about oneself makes room for new growth. The mature person may submit her beliefs to the test of reality and give up those that don't hold up in order to deal creatively with her fuller understanding of her life.

All of us have been suffering with our awareness of what our nation has done in Iraq. Whether or not we supported it, the feeling of revulsion is widespread in America. We are suffering as a people with what it tells us about ourselves and about what our leaders have been willing to do to others in our name, to gain a goal many of us see as impossible, and perhaps evil.

I believe we have violated and are continuing to violate the Geneva Conventions in causing others under our control to suffer. America is being called to judgment about its morality and maturity. I think our only ethical choice is to recognize that we cannot do more to give peace and freedom to the people of Iraq, and get out. We have caused them too much suffering with no achievable hope of our turning their country around.

Suffering, said Wieman, is the experience of loss, frustration, deprivation, security, popularity—whatever might provide personal comfort and cushion individuals from growth.

The most mature among us seek growth knowing they will suffer. The immature try to avoid the suffering and growth. Then when they suffer as we all must, they deny themselves the positive aspects that come from the growth. They experience only the pain.

Why do we suffer? We alone can give meaning to that question for ourselves. We can let suffering distort us, taking control of us in its ferocity, or we can choose to grow beyond the suffering persons we have been in our pain and sadness.

The choice won't let us avoid pain, for as Thomas Wolfe said in his essay "God's Lonely Man," Joy is rooted at the heart of sorrow, [and] ecstasy is shot through with the sudden crimson thread of pain.... So seen and so felt, the best and worst that the human heart can know are merely different aspects of the same thing, and are interwoven, both together, into the tragic web of life.⁶

And that, Billy, is why I think God allows suffering. If there is a God.

Dick Weston-Jones

READING from *The Source of Human Good* by Henry Nelson Wieman

The legends and...folklore,...art and...story,...recorded history and... celebrations of a people, are almost always...about past events in which suffering has played a considerable part. They concern heroism and devotion, struggle and triumph. These can scarcely occur without suffering.... Certainly the intermixture of suffering and happiness rather than happiness without suffering is required for [creativity to increase the good of life.] If great art teaches us anything about [human] nature...and the good of life, it tells us that suffering is intrinsic and essential to the increase of qualitative meaning.

In all intercommunication that is free, full, and honest, we expose ourselves and acknowledge in ourselves often much that is evil. This cannot be done without suffering. Then there is the humiliation and misunderstanding, the treachery and betrayal of trust to which one always exposes one's self in such openness.... This and more must be encountered if one enters the full tide of life and moves through the creative transformations whereby qualitative meaning increases.

Not all suffering under all conditions is good. It is good only when it enters as one essential ingredient in creativity.

When it opposes the creative event, as it often does, [suffering] is evil. Whether or not an instance of suffering is a barrier to creative good depends in great part on how the individual treats it and reacts to it.

One of the outstanding marks of maturity is the practice of seeking value in the face of suffering. The immature individual cannot do this. The small child cannot and should not be expected to do this, except in respect to small doses of suffering. Maturity, of course, is not merely a matter of years. Some people of fifty and sixty seem less able to seek value in the face of suffering than some children.

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