

Unity Church - Unitarian  
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Monthly Theme: Suffering  
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Why? What is the meaning of this? Why did this happen? Why?

These questions are common responses to pain, to loss and hurt, to sorrow. These seemingly lofty philosophical questions of life take hold of our spirit and can crush our resolve in the midst of our own or another's or the world's suffering. What, if anything, can be redemptive in suffering? What, if anything, can be redemptive, in a story such as this:

*"It was a typical fall day in October of 2006... Birds could be heard in the distance and little else, except maybe the clip-clop of a horse's hoofs and the rattling of a buggy heading down a back country road. It's normally quiet and peaceful in the rolling Amish farmlands of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.*

*But that peace was shattered when the sound of gunfire was heard from inside an Amish school. When local police broke into the one-room Amish schoolhouse they found 10 Amish girls ages 6-13 had been shot by Charles Roberts, who had then committed suicide.*

*The violence that is far too common in one society blasted its way into the non-violent, peaceful community of "the gentle people".*

*Charlie Roberts was a milk truck driver who serviced the local community, including the farms of some of the victims' families. Nine years earlier his wife gave birth to their first child, a baby girl. However, the baby died after living only 20 minutes. His daughter's death affected him greatly. He never forgave God for her death, and eventually planned to get revenge.*

*Roberts told the girls he was sorry for what he was about to do, but said "I'm angry at God and I need to punish some Christian girls to get even."*

Such a cynical and sinister story brings chills to my bones and pain to my spirit. I can't help but be overtaken by grief and anger in response to this story. What can be redemptive in this? It seems as the holy has bailed and we are left with sorrowful spirits and a flood of tears, and questions: why?

We know all too well that this is but one story in the countless volumes of stories of suffering; individual and communal. This is but one story that shakes the foundations of our hope and love seems silent. And so, the questions begin. Why? Where is meaning, or redemption, or the holy in this, this is hell on earth?

Such questions, most of the time, are simply unanswerable. We must acknowledge that pain and suffering exist, and that such experiences are unjustified and cannot be rationalized in a way that points to a greater purpose or plan. Such notions too often trivialize the hurt, the grief, the mourning that we all experience in our own lives. We simply do not know.

Whether in response to the death of a loved one, strained relationships, or systemic violence and genocide, feelings of sorrow and grief and hurt are a necessary and important part of our reality. Without acknowledging the unnecessary and unfair pain in the world, and our painful responses to it, it becomes difficult to move toward any sense of healing.

When I think of the pain in the world, I draw from our Unitarian Universalist heritage of uplifting the ethical teachings of Jesus. In the reading from Matthew, the ruler says, "whatever you have done or failed to do to these members of my family, you have also done to me."

Often the belief is that the divine reaches out *to* the suffering, extending love and compassion. While this is most certainly true, at times it has been taken over by a colonial mentality that we know what is right for those poor, suffering people, and we can help them out, for God is with us.

Jesus shifts that perception a bit, that whatever pain is done in the world is done also to God - to the spirit of life and love. Where is God in suffering? Perhaps God is the suffering. The spirit of love joins with our human experience, weeps as we weep, cries out as we cry out.

This same sentiment is shared by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., writing from Birmingham jail, *whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly*. Not only is the holy suffering, but all of us, in this interconnected web of existence, share in both the joy and the sorrow of the world.

This biblical tradition affirms the Spirit's presence in the midst of suffering, stating that the love and spirit of the divine is joined with those who suffer, with the broken-hearted. That same tradition also speaks about brokenness in another way: that what needs to be broken is systemic oppression of every kind. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible rail against idolatries of wealth and greed, and such a message is quite relevant still today.

For we know all too well that the people of Haiti were crumbling under economic oppression before the earth even began to shake. The horrific suffering there was far worse than it could have or should have been. The systems of the world need to be broken, lest they continue to cause brokenness.

In the midst of such suffering, systemic and personal, where do we begin? How do we begin to address the issues that cause suffering and how do we respond to suffering that seems inevitable? Often our society quickly turns toward retribution, revenge, and label it "justice." Justice has been served.

My brothers and sisters, I can't believe that revenge is the calling of love. As Rev. Dr. King said, *darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that; hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.*

We do not live in a world that is segmented and dichotomized into either this or that, no, we live in a world where our entire human existence, the totality of our life, is of one reality, of joy and sorrow, pain and promise, despair and hope.

I believe that such hope is possible; while it varies for each particular situation, and many forms of healing are necessary and appropriate, I cannot believe that suffering and brokenness have the last and only word. I believe in the possibility to rob death of its victory.

This time of year, leading to Easter, is the season of Lent in the Christian tradition. It is a season of reflection, of authentically acknowledging our own pain and the pain of the world. The mantra that begins the season on Ash Wednesday, which you may have heard before: *remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* (2x)

In one sense this phrase reminds us of our human mortality, our finitude. In another sense, it reminds us of our connection with the earth and all of existence. We are from the earth, which springs forth life, and we return to it to become sustenance again. This cycle of life and death and birth is one of transformation and redemption. The earth takes back to itself all beings, no matter what the circumstance, no matter the pain they have suffered or created, and restores them to be nourishment for life once more. The earth practices hope and restoration.

There is hope. Hope is not the belief that everything turns out perfect all the time, hope, rather, is a way of being; it is a way of being in the world that nurtures love and compassion and responds to the suffering of the soul and the world with transformation, redemption, and healing.

There can be beauty in the midst of brokenness. There can be deeper understanding and insight, a breaking open of the heart to greater compassion and love. We must return, return to the deep sources, return to our humanity and the brokenness that is there; we must speak of love.

There is beauty in brokenness when we mourn the loss of a loved one and begin to understand the healing power of those who hold us close.

There is beauty in brokenness as a youth watches a film about the Holocaust or Shoah, weeping, questioning where is justice and accountability; and with each tear she nurtures the compassion she will live out in her life. For she has been changed.

There is beauty in the midst of broken-heartedness and strained relationship with the potential to gain a new perspective on life, to understand the pain of another, to understand one's self more deeply, and to move toward healing.

While I do not believe that loneliness, despair, genocide, hatred, and discrimination are good because we can learn from them, I do believe there is hope, transformation, and redemption that can arise from the midst of it. Pain and brokenness are not justified, ever.

Yet the power and message of love is that rising from despair we can turn toward hope. In brokenness there is often beauty in our gaining of new insight about ourselves or our family or friends, or finding deeper empathy with others who have had similar experiences, or understanding more deeply the complexities and atrocities that rise from systemic oppression, or realizing the blessed memory of a loved one who continues to be a source of inspiration and comfort.

As a loved one returns to dust to nourish the earth and continues to nourish our souls after they have gone, while it is still full of sorrow, death is robbed of its ultimate victory.

The story from the Amish community in Pennsylvania continues...

*The horror of this school shooting was the story the reporters came to tell about. But a different story began to take shape.*

*In the midst of their grief over this shocking loss, the Amish community didn't cast blame, they didn't point fingers, they didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides. Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family.*

*The afternoon of the shooting an Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness toward the killer. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain.*

*Later that week the Roberts family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed. And at Charles Robert's funeral, Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish.*

*The Amish culture closely follows the teachings of Jesus, who taught his followers to forgive one another; Love and compassion toward others is to be life's theme."*

There was beauty in the midst of brokenness in Lancaster County. My brothers and sisters, pain is still pain. Suffering is still suffering. No amount of learning from the past or gaining new insight makes pain or suffering justified. At times the pain can seem so burdensome that hope seems unlikely and frankly, impossible, and that is understandable.

What takes away its power, however, is our response, individually and communally. Like a phoenix rising out of the ashes hope can soar from suffering, transformation can happen lest we become held captive by pain and sorrow, lest our hearts forever be broken.

Our ability to confront suffering with compassion is liberation. The healing power of community, of all of us who are made of dust, in this single garment of destiny, can ease our burden. When we gather in this sacred space, in worship and song, in meals and in learning, in the sharing of our stories, our joy and our sorrow, our pain and our promise are held as sacred, as holy. We join with others to share our burdens, to hold each other in love lest pain and death have the final word.

For in community, perhaps we can join with the apostle Paul in proclaiming, "Where, O Death, is your victory?" For we come with all of our soul, all of our lives, as we mourn and as we celebrate. For we come from a world where some say, "life is wonderful all the time" and where some say, "life is broken all the time." I am compelled to believe a different story: that our worth and dignity endures in the totality of our experience, in the fullness of our life. And in this story, I must believe that in the midst of the pain and sorrow we face, love will not fall silent, hope will not be overcome - beauty springs forth eternal. May it be so in our hearts and in our world. Amen.