

**“The Uses of Suffering”**  
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**Unity Church–Unitarian**

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**SERMON: “The Uses of Suffering”**

This sermon is based on the premise that we all suffer. That it is part of the human condition. Everyone in this room suffers from some deep wounds. Some find their source in childhood abuse and neglect. Others stem from illness, life disappointments, failures, betrayals of our own or our loved ones. Whatever the source, we gather as a community full of dynamic, talented, capable people who are also no strangers to suffering. I begin with a joke:

Imagine one of those classic New England small-town churches: a white, pristine clapboard church right on the village square. The joke goes that The Calvinist preacher looked down on his flock. In an effort to bring his message of hell and damnation home to his parishioners, he exhorted, “In 100 years every current adult member of this church will be dead and buried. Every single one. No exceptions!” Everyone looked thoughtful and solemn, except for one man who sat and giggled. He looked around and giggled some more. Though the other parishioner’s faces were full of concern and fear, he beamed through the entire service. In the receiving line, the preached couldn’t help asking the man why he had giggled. “Oh, I was just happy that I’m not member of this church!”

Well, I thought it was funny. Perhaps ministers have distorted senses of humor. But I do want to issue this warning: visitors are not exempt from the suffering clause. None of us are. We all suffer, we all have moments of despair, of existential loneliness that hit us so deeply, times when we are bereft and feel totally alone and lost.

In Christian scripture, Jesus is left alone in the garden at Gethsemane before he descends from the Mount of Olives to the ancient streets of Jerusalem. He can feel his destiny unfolding. He is completely alone. He prays to God that he will be spared. God is silent. Jesus remains full of despair. This garden experience is one that we have all known. We have all cried out and heard no response to our anguish. We have all sat in that garden asking why. We have all asked for help on bended knees, either figuratively or literally.

But my friends, the question to ask is not why, but how. It is human nature to begin with why. Why me, lord? But we are called to go beyond that first question. Because we are not strangers to suffering, we know we face a different question which is how to transform the suffering we encounter. Buddhist monk and writer Pema Chödrön writes in the book *The Places That Scare You*, “that first we must stop running away and avoiding our suffering. When we face it, then the task is to transform it.

Elie Wiesel, the great writer of the horrors of the holocaust and life in the concentration camps, tells this chilling story in his masterpiece *Night*. Three inmates are hung for some minor infraction, two adults and one child. The two adults die quickly after shouting, "Long Live Liberty!" The child, however, is silent and not heavy enough to die quickly. He dies agonizingly slowly. As he hangs there gasping for breath, one of the prisoners cries out, "Where is God?" Another replies, "Where is God? God is here, here is God, hanging right there in the Gallows."

I'm sorry to use such graphic imagery, but all of us are aware that such cruelty exists. Suffering is not just contained in the struggles of Job or to the holocaust. They continue to this day. Eli Weisel writes that when the cup of suffering is drunk to the dregs, we do find resources within ourselves that perhaps we didn't know. We find meaning and purpose that keeps us tied to the spirit of life. In other words, when we return from the garden, we are not the same person. We have heard the silence of God, or felt the presence of something stronger than ourselves, but we are changed none the less.

Martin Luther King Jr. was called to a mission of vicarious suffering for his people. In 1956, when his ministry was just beginning, he was suffering from the weight of what he had taken on. He wasn't sure he was up to what he sensed was ahead. Late one night in midst of this questioning time, the phone rang. He answered and heard, "Listen, Nigger, we've taken just about enough from you. If you don't stop, we're coming after you."

He wasn't sure he could go on. He prayed to God in his desperate despair. Slowly he began to feel a presence next to him. After sitting with the presence for some deep and pondering time, he felt the answers emerge within him. He knew he was not alone and that he needed to find courage to stand up for the righteous and the downtrodden. He never questioned his ministry or his mission to that depth again.

I do not want to imply that suffering is the only way to know God, to touch that higher power. It isn't. Joy and love also provide ways to experience the holy in life. But that also involves opening your hearts to the depth of life as well.

Every world religion has a response to human suffering. Christianity holds paradoxical ideas about it. In studying the scriptures one finds first the belief that suffering is solely the sufferer's fault, secondly that God creates suffering for us in order that we might learn the discipline of endurance. Thirdly, that suffering indicates the burden carried by a select few of a special call. Fourthly, that suffering is inevitable. And lastly that it is redemptive for our sins. These understandings of suffering are woven into the fabric of our culture.

They have created the context so that we feel guilty when we suffer, which of course compounds our suffering. I do not want to glorify suffering, but to acknowledge that suffering is one way that we can get in touch with the depths of life. We find out what we are made of when our hearts are broken up with pain as well as joy. If we do not experience pain and joy, then our souls do not grow as they might.

A butterfly must do the hard work of breaking out of the cocoon. The small baby bird must do the hard work to break out of the shell. If for some reason that process is thwarted, the butterfly will not fly, the wings become weak and warped. The same is true for us: the shells of our daily existence are broken but if we do the work, a new stronger heart emerges.

The Buddhists have a concept of “near enemies.” Near enemies are the mirror look-alike of some of our best impulses. Compassion is the deep response to the suffering of others. Pity is the near enemy. Pity does nothing to transform the suffering; as a matter of fact it keeps things stuck. Near enemies fool us because they often look so similarly to the emotion or state we want to feel.

Suffering brings us closer to the heart of life. But the idea that suffering brings one closer to God, to the depths of life has been misused throughout history. In the brilliant and highly personal book *Proverbs of Ashes*, Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakishima Brock detail how the distortion of suffering can create a cruel betrayal of our humanity, often accompanied by the use of theology which is little short of evil. They differentiate between this kind of cruel suffering from suffering which is redemptive, healing and life-giving.

What I would like to suggest is that we often stave off both kinds of suffering — that which is generative and that which leads only to more of the same — without listening closely to discern what we are staving off. No one wants to suffer, and people who seek it out should probably have their heads examined. But dealing with pain, hardship and suffering are all apart of the challenge that life presents us. When we don't avoid it but are present to it, hidden resources emerge, gifts from the spirit of life are given and our hearts, so weary from living can be reborn with new perspectives.

There is a story I want to share with you about the song “Spirit of Life” that we sung earlier. Spirit of Life is a very popular hymn in many Unitarian Universalist congregations. People often know it by heart. The song's composer, Carolyn McDade, was and is an involved social activist. One night she returned from one of those awful meetings that I suspect many of us have lived through, when she was disheartened and discouraged after working for many hours with other activists “to make things better.” It was late at night. Her husband and children were asleep. She felt defeated and hopeless. She sat at the piano and began to pray. She sent a plea into the universe. She says, “My ardent desire was to stay faithful to the movements I love, to the people of these movements and to our efforts toward realizing a world healthy and just for all, a world where reverence shone among us.” This song came to her. It is a prayer and an answer. It feels like a prayer once you think about it. Carolyn says, “In singing, my heart was freed.”

“Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion...”

Engaged Buddhists like the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and writer Pema Chödrön have much to teach us about suffering. These three compassionate beings have written extensively about suffering. The Dalai Lama talks at great length about the gifts that suffering can provide. It creates a soft spot in us that he believes is the source of all compassion. It creates a kind of nakedness that is powerful and helps us connect with the wholeness of life and with others suffering around the world. It is that pesky soft spot that is an access point for our most tender of feelings, it is the access point to redeeming love. Touch it when you dare, don't forget that it exists, for it is one of your greatest allies.

Compassion arises precisely from the depth of longing each of us feels for a world where no one would suffer, compromised as we are by the knowledge of the impossibility of that hope. To touch that soft spot, that longing and openness is to touch my life-force.

Spirit of life, come onto me, sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion. That soft spot connects us to the suffering of others. Its very tenderness is sign to others that we too have known suffering and can be present to their suffering.

In 1989, I was privileged to go on a fact-finding trip to the Middle East with a congressman from Virginia. We spent the majority of our time in the Occupied Territories. More specifically, we spent a lot of time in the refugee camps filled with generations of suffering Palestinians. I wandered off by myself down a road for just a minute but quickly lost my party. I tried to retrace my steps, but to no avail.

A beautiful woman about my age, watched silently from a doorway as I wandered. I walked around and when I circled by her again, she invited me in with a motion of her hand. Her home was as desperate a place as I have ever seen. The walls were bare except for one which she made clear were pictures of her two sons who had been killed by the Israeli army. She made me coffee and shyly shared some bread. Her children stood in the doorway intermittently staring and giggling. We ate silently. We had no language in common, but much was shared.

The ancient tradition of welcoming the stranger with generous hospitality is a core value of the Middle East. What I didn't know then is that the Palestinians have an ancient tradition of breaking bread. It is a ritual of forgiveness, of recognition of something broken and the acknowledgement that we can begin again in love. After sitting in silence she looked at me deeply. I felt myself opening up to that tender place in the essence of my being. We sat as tears began to flow between us. I grieved for her suffering. I did so through knowledge of my own.

Soon the frantic calls in English came through the open window and door. I jumped up and called to my friends, guides and traveling companions. They came. Our Palestinian guide talked to my friend. She told him that she knew that I was her friend. My fear at being lost had touched her initially, but she said something deeper unfolded. "I felt like she really could see the suffering in my life and that we shared it. I always thought Americans didn't understand, but now I realize at least some of them do."

I left feeling that soft spot of my suffering and hers. What more could I ask for? What more could we ask for than to touch one another through our soft spots giving rise to a potentially empowering compassion.

May it be so and Amen.