

**"Let your soul be your pilot, he'll guide you well"; □ □ □ □ Sting**

**"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience but shouts in our pains."; □ □ C. S. Lewis**

**"Meanwhile, where is God?**

This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, if you turn to Him then with praise, you will be welcomed with open arms.

But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away."; C. S. Lewis, A Grief Observed.

"My constant pain oscillates from ridiculously high to excruciating. Why doesn't God answer my prayers?"

Brian Sternberg. Suffering is one of the greatest challenges to faith and to our spiritual well-being.

Spirituality is the connection that many people feel to God or to something beyond us, but not necessarily within the bounds of conventional or traditional religion. People may be spiritual but not religious.

Illness may lead people to seek answers within the formal teachings of traditional religion or to search beyond these models.

Spirituality or faith may provide a means of coping with chronic illness, in whatever context this affects them as individuals.

Brian Sternberg, quoted above, was the number one pole-vaulter in the world until an accident in June 1963 whilst training broke his neck. Not only was he paralysed from the neck down, but he developed terrible centralised nerve pain throughout his numb body. Despite his terrible and ongoing ordeal, about 3 months after the accident, after a desperately dark period of depression, Brian found an awakening as a Christian.

Less than a year after the accident, Brian closed a Look magazine article with the quote:

“Having faith is a necessary step toward one of two things. Being healed is one of them. Peace of mind, if healing doesn't come, is the other. Either will suffice.”

So often, non-Christians cite suffering as a cogent reason for not believing in a God who can allow all the terrible suffering that persists day after day in our world, suffering and torment being experienced all too often by the innocent.

From our Judaeo-Christian cultural background, there is always an underlying implicit suggestion of guilt and thus of punishment by a wrathful or vengeful God. Yet we cannot square this idea with that of the meaningless suffering of little children.

The current disfavour with which religion is regarded has left the populace, not empowered as they believe, but profoundly DIS-empowered, cast adrift by their own will, but rudderless, directionless, and ultimately without a sense of purpose.

Philosophers and 'New-Age' acolytes have suggested that the 'bad things' which happen to us are a result of 'karma', a 'hippy' viewpoint that many people feel bears little relation to their individual experience, and it still fails to explain the suffering of children, unless of course, one embarks upon the reincarnation explanation.

There are many authors who have explored the meaning of suffering, such as C.S. Lewis, who watched his wife's life become decimated by bone cancer, until her untimely death.

Regardless of creed, many people who experience severe and/or prolonged suffering, find themselves asking the inevitable question:

"Why me?" Those who have 'sinned' in some way (and exceedingly few of us haven't) may balance the equation by believing they are being punished: but often they too come to the realisation that the punishment by no means fits the 'crime', at which point, they join the throng of aggrieved sufferers who feel that "it's not fair".

This seemingly puerile response is really an entirely rational response to a situation in which the individual feels he is being subjected to unwarranted torments.

One of the worst aspects of suffering is the loss of control over one's own destiny, the sense of loss of self-reliance and the need to depend on others. We need to step back a few paces and realise that much of the mental anguish we experience due to this, comes from our previous intense desire (sometimes need) to establish our independence, our self-reliance, the lack of need for support from others, even God.

This is endemic in the current Western culture, in which the individual, his needs and rights, takes precedence over all else. This turns out to be narcissistic hubris.

As John Donne realised,

"No man is an island".

However, pain and suffering often make us feel completely isolated, as if we were marooned on a desolate and inescapable island.

In our hour of need, do we call out in desperation to the God we forsook in times of plenty, or do we curse Him?

Often we do both, or we turn away from Him, shutting our hearts and minds to a Being who has been instrumental in our circumstances of emotional and mental famine.

For those with a religious upbringing, perhaps the trials of Job come to mind, and rekindle anger with a God who 'plays games' with peoples' lives.

Many people find some of the Biblical references to suffering hard to comprehend. For instance, in Romans Chapter 5,:

"suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,"

seems a very unsympathetic approach, although some folk do find this sort of passage inspirational.

Is suffering the work of God or the devil? This is a fundamental philosophical question.

If suffering has its roots in evil, then we are bound to curse it and to try to drive it out, whereas if one comes to terms with pain as being inevitable, and something that God does not instigate, but neither does he remove, then one can begin to see that there are lessons to be learnt, that

we do have some control over the level of suffering we experience, even if our pain is undimmed.

Suffering is our physical difficulties (pain, loss of function) combined with our emotional reaction to them.

It is in the latter, that we have the means to make meaning out of the seemingly random and meaningless.

I have met severely handicapped people and people in constant pain, who have retained their 'selves', their integrity if you will, in the face of tremendous adversity. Furthermore, some will readily declare that they have been in some way 'enriched' by their suffering.

That is by no means to suggest that suffering of itself ennobles the victim, far from it, it has a strong power to debase and destroy him.

No, it is not the experience of suffering that is uplifting, rather it is the struggle and ability to hold at bay the desire to surrender one's true self, to become defined not by one's character, but by the disease one suffers from.

I have also met many folk who become severely disillusioned, bitter and permanently beset with disturbing emotions and irrational beliefs. Sadly, they can lose faith not only in God, but also the innate goodness(?Godliness) that they could find in those around them if they were only to envisage its possibility.

They persist, however, in shutting out not only the ills of the world, but also hope and love, which as we all know (whatever our spiritual beliefs might be) are life-affirming and as necessary to human kind as the air we breathe.

So how can we approach suffering from a spiritual standpoint?

Well, we need to free ourselves of some illusions: become 'disillusioned' without becoming disenfranchised.

Illusions:

- We are masters of our own destiny
- Fate determines what happens
- A 'just' God would never allow suffering of innocent people
- Suffering is deserved punishment
- Suffering ennobles us
- God has forsaken us
- Acceptance= 'giving in'
- We have a right to be pain free
- People should always make allowances for our illness
- Disabled = unable
- Invalid = In-valid
- Suffering is unmitigated disaster
- Why should we think about others who are worse off: it diminishes our pain.

Kahlil Gibran defined religion as our daily lives; I feel that this emphasis on religion's integral role in our lives is unappreciated by so many who could benefit from the spiritual sustenance that is around us all, there for the asking.

I would never presume to dictate to anyone about something as intensely personal as spiritual belief: it is a matter for private contemplation.

I do, however, find it interesting that support groups such as the online ones, find it necessary to state in the protocol, that overtly religious material must not be posted as it may offend members. The other categories of 'banned' subjects included politics (from the sublime to the ridiculous, one might say!): from the spiritual to the seminal).

It is almost as if we are afraid to mention religion, that it infringes upon the personal dignity and rights of individuals.

Discrimination of race, gender, sexuality are all highly politically incorrect. Yet I believe that in our society, people who wish to openly express their religious beliefs are (albeit perhaps covertly, or in a humorous fashion) pilloried.

All too often, the listener is either affronted or considers the speaker to be suffering from some sort of mental illness, belief in an unscientifically-proven Supreme Being ranking alongside delusional beliefs about aliens.

Not only is it deeply unfashionable to discuss religion, but also quite likely to be considered offensive.

Against this background, before I continue, I would like to make it clear that what I am writing about is my own personal viewpoint. I have recently been accepted into the Roman Catholic faith.

I have run the gamut of periods of belief interspersed with long intervals of doubt, loss of faith and despair.

My spiritual beliefs now sustain me in a way that more secular information cannot.

As a scientist, I find no conflict between the existence of God and the 'rules' of science, indeed, the more mysteries that science explains, the deeper we find ourselves immersed in the inexplicable.

The notion that one day science will explain all is not, however, one I subscribe to.

Science has shown us that pain is a highly necessary physiological mechanism: those rare individuals born without the ability to feel pain are substantially handicapped, and those who lose their perception of pain in the extremities (such as diabetics with neuropathy, or sufferers of leprosy, Hansen's disease) have to become hypervigilant as to any damage to the affected

body areas lest infection set in: the normal warning signal, pain, has not been there to do its duty.

We know that acute pain is there for a reason, to protect us. Chronic pain is a rather different matter. It has no apparent use whatsoever.

Why would a benevolent Divinity allow suffering to go on? This is one of the profound Theological questions.

Some Christians believe that suffering draws us closer to God. This is expressed in the following quote:

“I have never thought that a Christian would be free of suffering. For our Lord suffered. And I have come to believe that He suffered, not to save us from suffering, but to teach us how to bear suffering. For He knew that there is no life without suffering.”

Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country.

Dorothy Sayers wrote:

“For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is- limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death- He had the honesty and courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself.

He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was



born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile."

As Philip Yancey says in his book, "Where is God when it hurts?":

"The cross, an eternal stumbling block to some, became the cornerstone of our faith." As he points out, discussions about God and suffering inevitably leads to the cross, the very symbol of Jesus' suffering, of His humanity and the way in which He endured the same suffering as that of mankind.

One of the main problems we come across is the notion that an all-powerful God would not intervene to prevent suffering. There are two ways I use personally to remind myself why this is not so. Firstly, I believe that God is incomprehensible to us and that we are far too lacking in understanding to appreciate His motives.

C. S. Lewis wrote extensively about God and suffering. In *The Problem of Pain*, he wrote:

"The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of God who loves is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word 'love', and limit His wisdom by what seems to us to be wise."

Secondly, the consequences of free will may mean that God cannot intervene, that He is not omnipotent. Professor John Hick in his book *Philosophy of Religion* claims that a world free of problems would prevent the development of any moral qualities of the human personality.

He maintains that it is the existence of real dangers and difficulties with the resultant possibilities of failure, frustration, defeat and thus pain and sorrow, which allows the growth of free beings of the "finest characteristics of personal life."

Hick suggests that this world may not be designed for the maximum of human pleasure and the minimum of pain, but rather for the more fundamental purpose of "soul-making".

I am reminded of a butterfly struggling to free itself from its cocoon. In order to emerge successfully transformed from earthbound caterpillar to free-flying butterfly, it needs the struggle to unfurl its folded wings and to shake the circulation into them to bring them to life.

Even the most expert of human helpers cannot assist, but destroy, by preventing this necessary struggle. In the same way, we need to struggle and to strive, because without that, we are unable to fully develop.

This of course could mean that praying for a cure is pointless. And in a sense, my own personal belief is that we should not be praying for our pain to be removed, but for the strength to bear it and to learn from it.

If Alexander Solzhenitsyn can write,

"So, bless you, prison, for having been in my life" (The Gulag Archipelago)

then I feel that I can too can draw some meaning from my own personal struggles.

I find what Nancy Mair wrote in "With Wings" personally inspirational:

"This gentleness is part of the reason I'm not sorry I'm a cripple...it has opened and enriched my life enormously, this sense that my frailty and need must be mirrored in others, that in searching for an shaping a stable core in a life wrenched by change and loss... I must recognize the same process, under individual conditions, in the lives around me. I do not deprecate such knowledge, however I've come by it."

The letters of St. Paul contain a number of references to suffering. In the second letter to the Corinthians, he wrote that God comforts and strengthens us in our hardships and trials and that He does this in order for us to help others in turn, so that we can pass on sympathy and understanding, help and comfort to them.

Christianity has at its core, the fundamental belief in a life after death, and this is often spoken of in connection with our present suffering.

As it says in the Book of Revelation,(chapter 21 verse 4)

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

There are numerous promises in the Bible, which relate to the temporary nature of our present life, full of suffering, set against the eternal bliss to which we shall be raised:

“and the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.” 1 Peter 5:10

“These troubles and sufferings of ours are, after all, quite small and won't last very long...the troubles will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever.” 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Yet these are of scant comfort to many, to whom the constant onslaught of pain in this life seems never-ending.

Those of us, however, who retain the comfort of faith, may find it helps to recall Christ's suffering and to remember that our life now is only a shadow of the life to come.

George MacDonald wrote:

"The Lord has come to wipe away our tears. He is doing it; He will have it done as soon as He can; and until He can, He would have them flow without bitterness; to which end He tells us that it is a blessed thing to mourn, because of the comfort on its way. Accept His comfort now, and so prepare for the comfort at hand." (from Life Essential)

I sincerely hope that this brief look at some of the issues involved in spirituality and pain has been of help and interest; loss of faith during illness can be devastating, but faith maintained or regained can be a tremendous source of strength.

A study reported in the April 2001 issue of the Journal of Pain looked at people with rheumatoid arthritis and their spiritual beliefs. Preliminary findings suggested that those who maintained positive spiritual coping strategies were much more likely to report better mood and higher levels of social support with lower levels of joint pain and that spirituality helped to boost their sense of overall well-being.

This is a small example which I hope will encourage you to look at this aspect of your life.

Man of all creatures  
Is superlative  
(Away melancholy)  
He of all creatures alone  
Raiseth a stone  
(Away melancholy)  
Into the stone, the god,  
Pours what he knows of good  
Calling good, God  
Away melancholy, let it go.

....

Speak not to me of tears

Tyranny, pox, wars,  
Saying, Can God,  
Stone of man's thought, be good?

Say rather that it is enough  
That the stuffed  
Stone of man's good, growing,  
By man's called God..

Away melancholy, let it go.

Stevie Smith Away Melancholy.

Interesting website: <http://www.cancersupportivecare.com/spirituality.html#Suffer>

Interesting website: <http://www.cancersupportivecare.com/spirituality.html#Suffer>

Suggested reading:

General:

Coping Successfully With Pain by Neville Shone, (1995, Sheldon Press)

Living Creatively with Chronic Illness by Eugenie G. Wheeler and Joyce Dace-Lombard (1989, Ventura)

Living, Loving and Healing by Bernie Siegel

In the Midst of Winter (Selections from the Literature of Mourning) edited by Mary Jane Moffat

[A Delicate Balance: Living Successfully with Chronic Illness](#) by Susan Milstrey Wells

The Chronic Illness Experience : Embracing the Imperfect Life by [Cheri Register](#)

Living Well With a Hidden Disability : Transcending Doubt and Shame and Reclaiming Your Life  
by [Stacy Taylor](#) , [Robert Epstein](#) (Contributor)

[What to Do When Someone You Love Is Depressed](#) by Mitch Golant, Susan K. Golant

Undoing Depression: What Therapy Doesn't Teach You and Medication Can't Give You by [Richard O'Connor](#)

Spiritual

When Bad Things Happen to Good People by Rabbi Harold Kushner

The Death of Ivan Ilyich by Leo Tolstoy

Intoxicated By My Illness by Anatole Broyard

A Grief Observed by CS Lewis

Where is God When It Hurts? by Philip Yancey