



“The End of Suffering”

Rev. Jennifer Ryu

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Call to Worship

Do not leave your cares at the door.

Do not leave there your pain, your suffering or your sorrows.

Bring them with you into this place of acceptance and forgiveness.

Place them on the common altar of life and offer them to the possibilities of transformation.

Sermon

The late Rev. Forest Church served as Senior Minister of All Souls New York City for almost thirty years, and he was an inspirational leader of Unitarian Universalists around the world.

Several years ago, he was unlocking the door to his office, when he found a letter tucked into the door:

This is what is said...

Dear Mr. Church,

What is the meaning of suffering?

I don't think I can handle it anymore. Nothing it seems has gone right in my life. I am very tired of this stupid life. If you can, tell me the reason for suffering or pain or adversity. Please tell me. I know people do not have an answer, and I know many people overcome adversity but I am tired of it. I feel absolutely hopeless. Is there a god or is there not a god? If I feel there is not a god what is the sense of going on? And for whom? I know this letter sounds crazy but I am tired of it I feel absolutely hopeless.

There was no name on the letter. It was signed, simply, a parishioner.

In every congregation----whether it's a busy cathedral like All Souls in Manhattan, or a quieter assembly here in Newport news----there are people struggling to know how to make sense of their suffering and how to live well – even in the face of pain.

We never ask these questions of joy and happiness do we?

When joy comes, we just take it all in. We don't ask why it has come.

But when pain comes to us, it forces us to think.

It forces us to wonder what has caused this suffering to come into our lives, and what does it mean?

Suffering also can create an opening that can draw us to other people in a way that joy cannot. Here is where we find the connection between personal suffering and compassion for others.

Jack Kornfield, the Buddhist teacher says that compassion rises when we have allowed ourselves to be touched by the pain of life. Our own pain, yes--and also the mess and misery of the world.

To what extent do you allow yourself to be touched by the pain of life?

The Sufi poet Rumi advised us not to turn away.
Keep looking at the bandaged place, he said, that's where the light enters you.

The awakened one—the Buddha—taught us that the central truth of human life is suffering. We don't have to look far to know why the Buddhists call that the first Noble Truth.

We live as animals do—precariously. We live on the surface of a dynamic planet with billions and billions of other beings. We move within a material world that is constantly decaying, dying and recreating itself.

Disease attacks our organs,
we bump into things, fall down, break bones.
We crash into other people and hurt them.
We grow old and our bodies ache where they never used to.

But human beings are more than just physical animals. We possess a higher consciousness. And so we suffer emotionally and existentially.
Not only do our knees and hips hurt, but the pain reminds us of our limitation—especially that final limit—death.

We suffer because our personal relationships are troubled—at home with our families, in the office with co-workers.
No one seems to understand; no one seems to be listening.

Or maybe nothing is happening. We feel nothing—just a dull and joyless emptiness.
These are some of the depths of suffering.

We experience suffering because we are human beings.
Since we are human beings, we cannot escape suffering.
But we can try to hold it in a very different way.

We can try to use our experience of suffering to strengthen our capacity for compassion and love.

Longing for some other reality is the definition of suffering.
Wishing that things were other than they are is the essence of suffering.

We cling to our expectations of the future and we cling to memories of the past. We are so dissatisfied with the present moment that there is no integrity in the now;
The present moment is merely a way to get somewhere else.
And so we suffer, longing to anywhere but here and now.

We may not be able to escape suffering, but we have a choice about how to respond to the pain. We can retreat into isolation, despair, or denial.
Or we can keep looking at the bandaged place where the light enters.

There is an old story that comes from Eastern cultures called the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

A Man has lost his only child. He is inconsolable with.

He goes to the holy one of the village

She gives him a mustard seed.

“I have a cure for your grief.

Find a family in this village that has not suffered any sorrow and give this to them. Then you will be cured.”

He takes this mustard seed to every house in the village.

House after house, he looks directly at the bandaged place, and those families share their stories of sorrow with him.

Slowly he feels the clenching around his heart start to relax.

We may not be able to escape suffering, but it does not have to end in despair.

Don't turn your head.
Don't turn away from the bandaged places.

Something has to break through the darkness to let just a little light through.
Paradoxically, that something is suffering.

The word suffer is related to the word allow, or abide.

If you allow yourself to sit with the pain, the grief, the agony of loss, you allow your heart to break.

When you let your heart break, the light from the deepest levels of your unknown self will seep through the cracks.

The Irish poet John ODonohue described that unknown self this way:

So much of what delights and troubles you
Happens on a surface you take for ground.
Yet it seems that a little below your heart
There houses in you an unknown self
Who prefers the patterns of the dark

It has the dignity of the angelic
That knows you to your roots,
Always awaiting your deeper befriending
To take you beyond the threshold of want,
Where all your diverse strainings
Can come to wholesome ease.

("For the Unknown Self" http://www.panhala.net/Archive/For_the_Unknown_Self.html)

If we will allow ourselves to feel the pain of our own suffering and the suffering of the world, we can find the light of hope seeping through the cracks of our broken heart.

Allowing ourselves to sit with our suffering is the very definition of compassion. In this case it is self-compassion. This is how we learn to suffer with others, by first learning to suffer with ourselves.

In this way, suffering can be a spiritual gift that wakes up and nurtures our capacity for compassion.

But like any gift, it can be received or rejected.

For some, the reality of sitting with their own suffering is too intense and they will do everything they can to escape the inescapable.

This is a perfectly logical thing to do. We are programmed to avoid pain and seek pleasure. When something happens to us that brings suffering, the first thing we want to do is find a way to get rid of the pain.

This is a choice we can all make, but we must understand the consequences. Franz Kafka once said, “You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world, that is something you are free to do and it accords with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could avoid.”

Life doesn't come to us in discrete little packages of joys and sorrows. Joyful events are often tinged with bitterness, and sorrows are mixed with delight. You can't custom order life so that there is no pain.

You can either have the largest possible life, and that means not holding yourself back from the sufferings of the world. Or you can live a small and narrow life, working hard to avoid suffering altogether:

We could stop caring about others and protect ourselves from that terrible crush of grief when they die or leave us. We could avoid working in places that might bring us close to people who are suffering: the ICU, the prisons, the mental hospitals. We could put them all out of our minds.

But we do that at great cost. As we limit our care and compassion, the expanse of our heart shrinks and our lives get smaller and smaller.

Theologian Dorothee Sölle has noted the extent to which middle-class societies have tried to insulate themselves from the pain of others and the pain of self. And then she connects that personal level of insulation to a societal culture of apathy.

She writes,

“In the materialist desire for heaven on earth, such societies anesthetize themselves to feeling, and are thus all the more capable of inflicting suffering. In relationships, she says, contemporary people move toward the frozen, the orderly and, therefore, the unfelt. Political apathy is an extension of personal and relational apathy. A society that could wreak such devastation on Vietnam [the world] must be “a-pathetic,” literally, unable to feel, Sölle writes (Suffering [Fortress, 1975]).

On the grounds of many Buddhist monasteries, you will find a lotus pond. Look past the large pink and white blossoms and you will see that the water is dark and murky. You can't grow lotus flowers in a marble pond full of clear fresh water. You have to grow them on the mud. Without mud you cannot have lotus flowers. Without suffering, you have no way to learn how to be compassionate.

There is a well known verse from the Torah that says, I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses, choose life so that you may live. When we choose life, we do so with the understanding that there will be death, there will be curses, there will be suffering.

So which do you choose?

Choose life so that you may truly live

Amen