

The Bible acknowledges the reality of pain and suffering. It is not denied or treated as an illusion. Neither is it explained – at least, not to my satisfaction! It just is. Religion is about what we do with our suffering: how we integrate our experiences of loss within a larger affirmation of life and love. Christianity doesn't minimize the reality of suffering or deny its impact in our lives. The early saints actually looked at suffering as a way to strengthen their souls, and some actually sought to suffer because of what they saw as spiritual training. For most of us, we have no need to seek suffering -- it finds us. It's encompassing nature causes us to re-calculate our faith response.

Breathe. Breathe deeply of the strong presence of the Lord.

Jesus with the man who has waited by the pool to be healed for 37 years. The time of day and the time of this man's life is important. The waiting is important. The anguish is important. The location - outside - in the public - a private suffering made public is important. The pity, the ignoring, the gossip, the veiled contempt, the silent abuse, the bypassing is important. The judging, the heads wagging, the isolation is important. This is a man's whose life is taken up in suffering, pain and powerlessness. He is lost in his helplessness. This man had been ill for 37 years. It was chronic.

Christine Rupprecht was a nurse manager at Walter Reed - works with the Pain Management Initiative. Talks about 2 positives that have come from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan -- prosthetics improvement and renewed focus and progress in pain management. Talks about pain as the "great obliterator" - it has the ability to take over your entire life. Its dominance and absorbing nature leads to increasing fear that it will not lessen and the fear of more pain. It is not just a symptom -- it is a disease in itself. Caregivers need to respect and believe their patients. For even phantom pain - in a limb that isn't there - is real and not imaginary. Patients are to be treated wholistically and personally. Knowledge and empowering. And she sees the whole family as the patient.

In suffering we face the unsettling questions that emerge in the context of the great unfixables of our own life. Keith Meyer -- lives with chronic pain. At age 45 he woke up at 4 am with an intense biting and stabbing sensation near the back of his head, on the right side of his neck. Felt like someone had stuck a jagged knife in him. Congenital disease of the spine that caused disintegration of the soft discs between the vertebrae, coupled with growing clusters of sharp bone spurs

that acted like not so tiny needles pricking constantly at his nerves. Vertebrae in his neck growing narrow closing up and calcification of his spinal cord. Nerves were deadening - the ones controlling the muscles of his legs, arms, and intestinal tract which would result in a slow process of paralysis of much of his body and functions. Weakening rapidly.

Constant pain robbed him of the comfort of sleep. Life was almost unbearable. No physical therapy for this - only surgery. 8 hours to free the nerves and spinal cord - wore a halo - attached into his skull with a plastic jacket that went down to his waist - to keep neck, shoulders and head from moving. Wore for 4 months. All of this was to result in a relaxing of the nerves - he would feel as good as new. For some reason the nerves and muscles didn't relax. Instead, body tightened so much that he has a constant crushing pain all around his head.

Life began to lose its color. Sunny skies were filtered through the lens of his agony. Music, walking in the woods, reading a book lost their pleasure. Despair took over. AND shook his confidence in God. Where was God? Pain and its response were forming and teaching him re-teaching him about life. In this situation, questions that he had previously answered about God's goodness, power and gracious involvement with him, indeed life's meaning and the possibility of enjoying it as well as the ability to persevere in suffering were all open for debate. He shouted a lot. Cursed. God's steely silence was all he heard back. Life went from open and growing and building to a kind of prison sentence.

Movie "A Beautiful Mind". Story of a brilliant but troubled mathematician who overcame schizophrenia and the voices of imaginary people it produced in his head that were taking him out of what he knew to be reality and estranging him from his loved ones and work. One day he came up with a solution. He would stop talking to these imaginary figures. They could try to engage him but he would simply ignore them and not make himself available to them by redirect his thoughts until these illusions stopped bugging him or their attempts to do so lost their power.

Here is an approach - stop practicing pain's presence and talk to God about going deeper with Him. Ask God to help him to not be captive to his thoughts and emotions? Is it possible to find the gift of a prayerful consciousness that had more power than the pain did? Yet pain has a way of being persistent. Stronger than any other opponent. Invitation was to trust him with more each day - more of his heart and mind - each day. Allow himself to move into the conversation

that is always going on in my head about how I feel and how unfair it is. And rather than get stuck there, to offer each thought moment by moment to Him. Since pain was constant - God was inviting him into a constant conversation. To do this - he learned a number of short prayers. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner. Coordinated with breathing. Talk more to God and allow God to talk to him rather than letting the pain do all of the talking. Praying without ceasing suddenly started making sense. Promise of 2 Corinthians: *God of all comfort will comfort us in any and every affliction.* And this phrase from Francis DeSales: "If God does not take away your pain he will give you the ability to endure it."

Now has had the pain for 10 of his 55 years. Colors have returned - through the constant prayer. Deeper and more vivid than before. Intimacy with God runs deeper and more vivid. We don't have answers to why this happens. Some day, the pain will be removed for good. He has come to believe that if God doesn't take away the pain, He will meet us in it and give us much more than the ability to just endure.

Pain may be physical -- may also be spiritual, emotional, and relational - that comes from our weakness and even sinful ways of dealing with that pain -- the less than God centered ways we have of coping with our situation and trying to control the world around us. How easily I go to this place. Of self pity - or regaling at the injustice that I have had to endure - or just staying in a place of murmuring and complaint. The invitation is to practice God's presence in the midst of pain and suffering so that pain and suffering can be transformed. The truth that emerges is -- that whatever pain we have - be it physical, social, relational, spiritual, when met with God's power to form it and us, is the most powerful formation we can have. Pain helps us tune in to something that needs changing in our lives. Something we need to know, to accept, to let go of, to move towards. It is not just there to make us feel bad. Pain as a teacher. Disorientation - being overwhelmed - as an invitation to get focused. Focus on God here and now. Surrender is not so much a giving up as it is an opening up. Not abandonment. Giving in to despair. Not easy to surrender! Not submissive. Not resignation. Rather an invitation into something greater, fuller than ourselves. Invitation to be ourselves more fully! It is choosing to live in the face of the unknown. When we surrender in faith, we open ourselves to another possibility.

Discuss my experience with depression as a sophomore in college. "Let go and I will catch you" are the words I heard as I anticipated my junior year.

This is what happened to the man by the pool. As Jesus called him - and calls us - to a different awareness, a different perception of the situation, a fuller view of his illness. That it is not about getting in or not getting in the pool. It is not about figuring out the situation, fixing it, making it better. It is about surrendering our view of reality into the larger view of reality that we participate in through Jesus. To new dimensions of faith and love not yet explored. We do not give ourselves up in the sense of extinguishing ourselves. Instead the little pin hole of light we are joins with the holy flaming that is God. We are brought more fully into ourselves and at the same time brought into that fullness which is greater than everything else.

Next time you are in pain's presence - or anger - or injustice - or shame - or the why me place - ask - what does this situation or feeling or thought tell me about myself? About God and life's possibilities? What can I learn from this place? What do I need to know from here? And bring prayer to it. The Lord's prayer. Or the Jesus prayer. AND the question - can I really trust that I do not have to prove myself to be accepted by God? That we are truly saved by grace and not by anything we do? AND so at times - we need to go there in our lives. To leave the doing until later and simply be in Christ's presence. And allow him to meet you there.

Long before this winter's cold I ran from pain, looked high and low for some fast way to get around its hurt and cold. I'd have found, if I had looked at what was there, that things don't follow fast or fair. That life goes on, and times do change, and the grass does grow despite life's pains. Now I know that the sun does shine, that children smile, and from the dark, cold, grime a flower comes. It groans, yet sings, and through its pain, its peace begins.

Jesus is bigger than all of what we bring to him. Even though we know ourselves to be a mix of fear and doubt, unanswered questions and mixed motives, even though we are not performing well, if at all - we realize that God is bigger and meets us where we really are. There are no shoulds with God. 23rd Psalm goes from "He makes me to lie down -- he leads me - to -- I shall fear no evil for thou -- **you** -- are with me....Stops talking about God and talks to God when the going gets rough.

Ps. 145: 14 The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, O Lord, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand. And fill all living things with plenteousness.