

# *Pain Management*

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*Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.* —Buddhist saying

*God comes to us disguised as our life.* —Paula D'Arcy

**Invitation to worship:** Denise Levertov, *The Avowal*

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
**as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,**  
so would I learn to attain  
free fall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
**knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.**

**Ancient Witness:** Matthew 26:36-39

I like the story of a boy who is sitting on the shore of a beach, watching the waves roll in. His mother asks, "What are you doing?" "Just noticing that the waves keep crashing in, and there's nothing that I can do to stop them," he says. "How does that make you feel?" she asks. "Relieved."

Life is like that. The waves keep rolling in. The good and the bad. Pleasure and pain. It relentlessly moves forward. And when we come to a realization that there's nothing we can do to stop it and simply allow it to roll in, we can feel relief, well-being and reduce the amount of suffering in our lives.

And so that's what I want to talk about today—reducing the amount of suffering in our lives. This sermon is for those who are experiencing suffering right now, or for those who know someone who is, or for those who will experience it down the line. In other words, this sermon is for everyone.

There's a Buddhist saying: "Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional."

And while I think this may be an overstatement—that there is a kind of inevitability to suffering, too—there is a lot of truth to this adage.

I don't think that anyone ever reaches a spiritual state of experiencing pain but no suffering at all. Even someone like Jesus experienced moments of suffering. Even the gospel writers, who were anxious to show him as the Son of God had to admit this.

Today's reading in Matthew 26, starting at verse 36, is an account of Jesus at Gethsemane the night before his arrest, torture and death. He's feeling abandoned and is watching it all come down on

top of him. He's watching the waves roll in. And he's really in agony. It says that he "began to be grieved and agitated."

*Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "Abba, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."*

Let this cup pass from me. What a human thing to say. How many times do we say this in our lives? How many times do we feel it and think it? Let this cup, let this pain, let this grief pass from me.

I found an article some time ago about the difference between pain and suffering by someone named Rob Johnson, who was writing about the painful experience of Cluster Headaches:

*The pain of our Cluster Headaches is the subject of many of the messages we exchange, the topic fills the medical literature we read, and is the primary purpose for the multiple visits to doctors.*

*Suffering is quite a different animal. It is an emotional/psychological condition which is often experienced even when there is no pain; it is commonly experienced as fear, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, dread and fearful anticipation.*

*Suffering is a normal, even automatic, response to pain, love (as in death, divorce, or other major losses), and a host of other difficult experiences. However, suffering can be intensified, sustained, and even created quite independently of any of these experiences.*

We can suffer even when we are not in pain. How we think about an experience creates corresponding emotional reactions, good or bad. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), helps people recognize that thinking habits can stimulate emotions that are disruptive, distorting and lead to suffering.

With CH, for example, patients might think, "I can't bear the pain!" But a response might be, "I always have. I know pretty much what to expect; I've got some medication which helps. I can bear the pain because I always have. It has always stopped. I will be O.K."

How we think matters. The ancient wisdom of the Buddha says,

*We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves.*

And in my primary tradition, Jesus was all about addressing the pain of others. Like the Buddha, he spent much of his time as a healer—touching the blind, the lame, the lepers, the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the ostracized.

He addressed the pain but also addressed their suffering. He tried to get people to see the world in a way that gave them peace. John's account of Jesus is certainly consistent with this aspect: "Peace I give to you..." "I've said these things so that your joy may be complete."

Jesus didn't romanticize, he didn't deny pain and suffering—his own or others'. In fact, he said to follow him would lead one to encounter it—to take up one's cross. But he didn't stop there. He said there is a way to live to find heaven in the midst of life. Jesus didn't deny the pain.

In fact, the unconscious thought that we can hold pain at a distance is a thinking error that leads to suffering. We may think—without being aware we are thinking this—that “It's not fair. I shouldn't be experiencing it. I'm not going to let it in.” And this resistance/fear/avoidance of pain brings its own kind of suffering.

As many of you know, in the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha, it starts out, “Life is suffering.” That is, suffering is real. We all suffer. And unless we've achieved a constant nirvanic state (which I highly doubt), we're suffering right now. Sometimes we don't even know it. We've gotten used to it, like a toothache that is constantly there. You pull out the tooth and say, “Wow, this is great! I didn't realize that I was in pain!”

And the release from suffering comes with the *acceptance of life as it is* and by experiencing it fully just as it is, *without any desire or need to change it*. The paradox is that the full acceptance *even of our pain* releases us from suffering.

The word that Buddhists use for our tendency to deny our pain and to mentally filter it out is *aversion*. It's when we resist life. When we try to resist our life as it *was*, that's *regret*. When we try to resist our life as it *may be*, that's *anxiety* or *worry*. And this resistance to accepting and embracing our life, as it is, is the source of suffering.

When we say that something weighs heavily on our mind, what is going on? There's an internal struggle—we mentally try to push the negatives away—we are saying “take this cup from me.” It takes a lot of energy to try mentally to keep these painful things away—become tired, depressed. And sometimes our bodies physically do this when we experience pain that is too much to bear at the time—there can be a natural numbing defense mechanism—a dissociation—a removal from one's body. (As a chaplain, I observed this for example, when a husband saw the body of his deceased wife lying on a table in the Emergency Department, who died suddenly in a horseback riding accident. He was numb and couldn't cry at the time.) For the short term, this can be a blessing. But the goal and the path toward wholeness is acceptance. “Not my will but Thy will” is how Jesus put it.

There's this great line by Paula D'Arcy, and she put it like this:

*God comes to us disguised as our life.*

I believe that this is true. And I both love it and hate it, to be honest. This is not an easy truth. There's nothing superficial about it. D'Arcy was pregnant when she was in a car accident that killed her husband and her small child. And yet. And yet she could say that God comes to her disguised as her life! Let that sink in.

And so, here's the thing: Do you love your life? That's the primary spiritual question. And loving our life is like loving a person—you've got to love the whole person, not just selected parts. Life comes to us as a package deal, an undivided whole.

Personally, I've always had a love-hate relationship with life. And sometimes it's tempting to say, "Look, Life, we need to talk. Have a seat. Now, I told you that I was going to need to see some changes. You know, Life, I'm pretty disappointed in you right now. This is just not working out. I think we need to break up."

Now, there are those for whom this ambivalence would be a lot more understandable—those for whom life have been unfair, harsh and cruel. What's utterly amazing are these who come to see that God comes to *them* disguised as their life. And in the midst of their pain and harsh circumstances, they discover an unshakable peace and deep joy and gratitude. In spite of it all, their life is sacred, precious and good.

So most of the time, it's really about bad habits that are hard to break—ways of thinking that are counter-productive. How do we deal with pain and suffering? It becomes a question of being a friend with one's life. It's about having a healthy relationship, a trusting relationship with one's life, not holding resentments or grudges against it.

You've all heard the serenity prayer, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr and used by 12-Step Programs:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can change,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Most of the time, I think, we focus on changing things and ourselves. But I want to focus on the first line. What does it mean to accept things? I think it means much more than we think it does. It means more than just "put up with," or "resign oneself to" or "grin and bear it" or "endure." Accepting things is also much more than "letting go."

I believe it is "letting in." I believe that it means to embrace and hug reality, to take the world as it is. When we truly accept our circumstances, our reality; we don't resent them; we don't resist them. How do we do this? Practice! One moment at a time.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*

**Call to Commitment:** Albert Camus

*If there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life.*