

Tim, the young man who came to me seeking a reason for living, recently left his job in business and went back to school to prepare to teach math in an inner city high school. He feels that he has found the meaning and direction he had previously lacked. He is excited and very happy; for he sees his new work as a way of contributing to the enrichment of individuals and of human life as a whole. I believe it will also enable him to savor life more.

Everyone of us needs to feel a sense of meaning and purpose in living. To find and live that sense is a religious task. Within the broad context of the liberal religious perspective, there are many kinds of work and many ways to find and live a deep and satisfying sense of meaning and direction, ways in which we contribute to the ongoing universal evolutionary process of life-enlargement and enrichment.

PART III

THE CRISIS OF PAIN AND SUFFERING

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?

Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.

Job 14:1

And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price.

Ivan Karamasov, *The Brothers Karamasov*,
by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which little children are put to torture.

Dr. Rieux, *The Plague*, by Albert Camus

The Traditional Problem of Suffering

Several years ago I received a call from a church member asking me to see her niece whose six-year-old daughter was dying of cancer. The young mother had no church affiliation and wanted to talk about her daughter's imminent funeral. The aunt thought her niece might also need help with her feelings about her daughter's illness and impending death.

I called on the young mother the next day. We talked, and she showed me a picture of her daughter taken before she became ill. Her daughter was a beautiful and bright-looking child. I was saddened to think that such a lovely child would not be able to live a long life. I asked to see the little girl even though she was sleeping because of the heavy sedation given to reduce her pain. I was sickened by what I

saw. She was very thin, the left side of her face was swollen by tumors and her left eye bulged grotesquely. That once beautiful and healthy child was now an ugly disfigured skeleton of a little girl. My heart ached, and I fought unsuccessfully to hold back the tears. I could only imagine how much more pain and hurt that mother felt.

I also found myself feeling angry, angry that this could happen to such a sweet and innocent little girl. Why did this child have to suffer so horribly and die? Surely she had done nothing to deserve such a fate. Was her mother being punished because she had borne the girl unmarried? Surely not, for the punishment was far worse than the offense. What kind of a world is this anyway, in which innocent little children suffer like this and die before they have really lived?

That was not the first time I had asked those questions, although perhaps never before with so much passion. I had asked those questions many years ago when I learned about Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and again when I saw nightly televised reports from Vietnam showing women and children slaughtered, and again when I saw the shrunken bodies and swollen stomachs of starving children in Africa, and so on — too many times, too many times.

One of the major reasons I had become a religious liberal was that I had not found satisfactory answers to these questions in traditional Christianity. The age-old question of why bad things happen to good people had led to a religious crisis for me, as it has for many others. The experience of pain and suffering often leads to a personal crisis because it shatters the foundations on which we build our lives. In particular it shatters our view of the world as a just and decent and meaningful place.

Why bad things happen to good people has been a tormenting question for human beings for millenia, perhaps since the beginning of human consciousness. Religion has been asked to explain the prevalence and persistence of suffering.

One of the earliest answers to the question is the view that pain and suffering are the consequence of sin. According to this theory, God punishes people for their wicked deeds and rewards them for their good acts. This view was dominant throughout most of the Old Testament, although an occasional voice questioned it. The most powerful rejection of it came late in the Old Testament period, in the *Book of Job*. The story is familiar. Job, a wealthy, righteous, God-fearing man, loses his possessions, then his children, and finally his own health is broken. In his pain and anguish Job tries to understand why he is allowed to suffer so terribly when his evil neighbors continue to prosper and live enjoyable lives. Until these catastrophes befell him, he had accepted the traditional understanding of suffering as a punishment for one's transgressions. But Job insisted that he was a decent man. He did not deserve the awful pain inflicted upon him. Despite the counsel of his so-called comforters to repent of his sins and ask for God's mercy, Job refused. He knew he was right. He knew he did not deserve what had befallen him. The traditional answer did not square with reality, and the book of Job was written to challenge that position.

In the New Testament Jesus also repudiates the identification of suffering with punishment. When he is asked whether a certain man's blindness was caused by the man himself or by his parents, Jesus replies, "Neither this man

nor his parents sinned." Human suffering, he was saying, is not the result of God's punishment for our wrong-doings.

Very few if any religious liberals believe that suffering is punishment. Yet many of us still think that way at least subconsciously; for whenever a tragic event occurs, often the first question that comes to mind is: "What did I do to deserve this?"

We tend to believe the world is just and orderly, and if that is the case, then there must be a good reason why we suffer. Hence we try to blame someone or something, and often we can think of reasons to blame ourselves. "If only I had gotten him to a doctor sooner . . ." "If only I had been there at the time . . ."

In my first parish, a couple active in the church had lost their only son at the age of fourteen in an auto accident. As I talked with them about it, it became clear that to some degree at least they felt that something they had done had been responsible for their son's death, and nothing I said could dissuade them from that view. It was as though they needed to believe their son's death was a punishment for their sins.

I now know there are both psychological and theological reasons for the persistence of the view of suffering as punishment. Psychologically it is a way of dealing with the guilt every person feels; for if suffering is a punishment for sin, then it becomes a way to atone for sin.

Theologically, the persistence of the idea that suffering is a divine punishment involves the whole concept of a just universe. If goodness is not rewarded and evil is not punished, it is difficult to maintain that we live in a just, fair, and orderly cosmos. And if the universe is not just, then what does that do to belief in God? That twentieth century

Job, Archibald MacLeish's J.B., cries out in his anguished effort to understand why he lost his children: "We have no choice but to be guilty. God is unthinkable if we are innocent." ¹

The traditional problem of suffering is usually stated something like this: If God is both perfectly good and all-powerful, as the Biblical tradition seems to maintain, how can God allow suffering and evil? For, if God is truly good, God would not permit the existence of suffering and evil, and if God is all-powerful, God would be able to prevent suffering and evil. The traditional understanding of God leads to a dilemma: God is either not all-powerful or He is not good. Neither option is acceptable to the traditional theist.

The problem of the goodness of God in the face of undeserved suffering is confronted by Ivan Karamasov in Dostoevsky's great novel, *The Brothers Karamasov*. To Ivan it might be possible to justify the suffering and death of adults, but there can be no justification for the suffering of innocent children. At one point in the novel Ivan relates several incidents of brutality perpetrated on little children, and he expresses his outrage at a God who allows such unjust suffering. "I must have justice, . . . not justice in some remote infinite time and space, but here on earth, and that I could see myself." ² It is not so much that Ivan doubts God's existence, but that he repudiates a God who is unjust. If the sufferings of little children are necessary to pay for the harmony of the world or to pay for truth, then for Ivan the price is too high. Ivan cannot love a God who allows children to be tortured nor can he love a world in which innocent children suffer.

This is also the theme of Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* in which the twentieth-century city of Oran is struck by bubonic plague. One of the principal characters is a priest who at first maintains that the people were suffering and dying because God is punishing them for their sins and calling them to repentance. After working with the dying, the priest's position softens, and in his next sermon dealing with the problem he confesses that he does not understand but believes that we must trust and love what we cannot understand. He also says that the Christian must suffer and sacrifice herself or himself as Christ suffered and gave himself.

The principal character in the book, however, is not the priest but a physician, Dr. Rieux. After Rieux and the priest have worked side by side in a vain effort to save a dying child, they engage in a brief conversation. The priest expresses sad acceptance of the child's death, but Dr. Rieux is angry. "Perhaps we should love what we cannot understand," says the priest, reiterating the theme of his second sermon. "No, Father," replies Dr. Rieux, reminiscent of Ivan Karamasov, "I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which little children are put to torture."³

Ivan's and Dr. Rieux's outrage at the apparent injustice of the universe is the modern version of Job's protest. The difference lies in the answers given to the problem of suffering. Near the end of the *Book of Job* God finally answers out of the whirlwind:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements — surely you know!
Have you commanded the morning since your days

began.. Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? ..."
(from Chapter 38)

God's words may be interpreted as a severe reprimand. "Who are you to question my ways and judge my wisdom? I am God and you are but a man. Trust me and keep your place; don't try to comprehend that which is for you incomprehensible. Don't question my purposes." And Job gets the message. He repents and acknowledges that it was presumptuous of him to think that he should understand the deepest mysteries of life. His role was simply to trust that the Omnipotent was wise and good.

There is wisdom in that point of view and there is comfort and consolation. But for Ivan and Dr. Rieux and for many of the liberally religious, it is neither intellectually satisfying nor morally adequate.

The Biblical tradition offers other explanations of suffering than the idea of punishment. One is the notion that suffering is a test of faith. In the *Prologue* to the *Book of Job*, Satan persuades God to inflict suffering on Job as a test of his faithfulness. Today, too, we sometimes hear people justifying pain or suffering by regarding it as a test of their commitment to God or his cause. One may wonder, however, what kind of God puts people to such tests as incurable cancer or the death of a child. The notion of suffering as a deliberate test of faith initiated by God raises as many questions about God's goodness and justice as it purports to answer.

Another view is that evil and suffering are the work of God's archenemy, the Devil. But that, too, raises more questions than it answers. For, if God created Satan, then God is still ultimately responsible for evil and suffering. And if the Devil was not created by God, then he is a second

god, an evil god, and God is not all-powerful. We are back to the original dilemma. God is either not good or not omnipotent.

One of the more prevalent justifications of suffering is the view that the balance will be put right after death. If there is injustice in this life, it will be corrected in the next life when the good will be rewarded and the evil punished. This is one of the views associated with Christianity. The great eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, often called the most Protestant of philosophers, held it. For Kant it was clear that goodness was not always rewarded, and evil was not always punished. However, Kant could not believe in a capricious universe or a God who acted less than justly. So he maintained that the injustices of this life would be rectified in the next. So strong was his belief in ultimate justice as a philosophical necessity that he saw it as a kind of proof of immortality. But if one cannot believe in a life after death in which the scales will be balanced, this view fails to satisfy.

Also central to the Christian tradition is the belief that suffering can be redemptive. If one has sinned, perhaps by suffering one can be relieved of guilt and feel that one has atoned for his or her wrongdoing. This idea is extended in the concept of vicarious suffering. Christ's suffering on the cross is believed to atone for the sins of others and thus to redeem them. Deep in the Christian tradition is the view that the suffering of believers may help to transform their lives and the lives of others.

Soren Kierkegaard writes out of this conviction when he says that the way of purification is affliction. He also believed that suffering was essential to achievement and that

there is joy in suffering when you know that suffering is the right way.

These, then, represent the major traditional attempts to answer the questions of why there is suffering and evil at all, and in particular of why bad things happen to good people. Most religious liberals do not find them satisfying, in some cases because we are operating out of a different philosophical/theological framework and in other cases because, like Ivan Karamasov and Dr. Rieux, they offend our sense of justice. In fact many of us were driven, as I was, from traditional to liberal religion precisely because we could not reconcile the prevalence of suffering and evil with the traditional concept of God. We turn now to some liberal approaches to the problem of pain and suffering.

Liberal Approaches to Pain and Suffering

The first question we must ask is whether the question, "why bad things happen to good people," poses an intellectual or theological problem for the liberally religious in the way it does for the more traditionally religious. Since liberal religion includes both theistic and humanistic perspectives, we must look at the answers each perspective offers.

For the humanist, it is not necessary to try to reconcile the concept of a good and all-powerful God with the existence of suffering. The traditional problem of theodicy simply does not exist in the familiar way. If, however, the humanist has no need to justify the ways of God, he or she does need to maintain a faith that life is good and worth living despite the existence of pain and suffering, despite the fact that innocent people suffer and die prematurely. Therefore, it is still important to understand why bad things happen to good people.

From both perspectives human freedom will be seen as one of the causes of suffering. Some of the choices we make bring suffering. If I drink too much and then drive my car, have an accident and severely injure myself, I have suffered as a result of my own poor choices. I can also inflict mental suffering on myself by, for example, castigating myself for an unwise decision I made years ago. I will suffer as a result of my own poor judgment.

The choices we make not only affect ourselves but often affect others too, and the choices others make sometimes affect us. Someone who drives while intoxicated may have an accident and injure or kill others. Something I say or fail to say may hurt another person. The unspeakable horrors of Nazism and of Stalinism were all the result of choices made by one person or group of people. There are countless instances in which we human beings acting alone or in concert inflict pain and suffering on one another. Because we are to some extent free, we are also free to inflict great hurt and suffering on our fellow human beings.

Freedom is the source of our greatest triumphs. Indeed, we would be less than human without freedom. But it is one of life's paradoxes that this gift of freedom is the source of both our grandeur and also our misery. There is a correlation between our capacity for self-determination and for good and evil. The greater our capacity for self-determination, the greater is our capacity for good or evil. The nature of things is such that these go together. Yet most religious liberals hold that one of the goals of human life is to increase the degree of our self-determination, our freedom, though, ironically, that also means we increase our capacity to cause pain and suffering.

Another reason bad things happen is the inhumanity of human beings to one another. Liberal religion has in the past been reluctant to speak of sin and evil. This is a weakness that comes of our history. Liberal religion in America was born in reaction to the orthodox emphasis on original sin and human depravity. Liberals held that human beings did not come into the world with a predisposition toward evil, as these dogmas insisted. Liberals held — and hold — that we are born good and educable, and the way we are treated socially plays an important role in the degree to which we lead constructive or destructive lives.

But we can recognize the extent of human malice and perversity without the dogma of original sin. From modern psychology we have learned of the potential for evil within the shadowy depths of the psyche. From evolutionary biology we have learned of the centrality of the instinct for self-preservation, which is easily transmuted into self-centeredness. We know that when our self-interests collide with the interests of others, we tend to pursue our own interests. Sometimes this leads to suffering on the part of another. When as part of a divorce settlement, for example, two people fight over shared property or the custody of their children, the one who loses suffers a great deal as do the children. The self-interests of two people are in conflict.

Moreover, self-centeredness can become exaggerated or perverted and lead to cruelty. This happens, for example, when one person feels that another stands in his way, and he inflicts injury to get him out of the way. Even the best of us do not always will the good of others.

Sometimes when our self-interests seem threatened, we develop an animosity far out of proportion to our needs, and we may inflict injury far beyond that necessary for self-

protection. An escalating animosity like that may have been at work in the long history of anti-Semitism which led to the atrocities of the Nazis against the Jews. Those atrocities can only be understood as the expression of human malice, vindictiveness, and bigotry. Those and other events of the twentieth century have forced religious liberals to reconsider our conception of human nature and to develop a modern doctrine of evil.

Ironically, even good intentions and lofty ideals may be transmuted into evil that causes suffering. I may steadfastly pursue what I believe are basically good goals, but in doing so trample on others in such a way as to cause them suffering. For example I may push others aside as I seek professional advancement, or in trying to help others I may reinforce a dependency that harms them. In his excellent book, *The Devil and Dr. Church*, Forrest Church shows how such virtues as tolerance, respectability, knowledge, sophistication and piety can be perverted into evil.⁴

Unwavering devotion to the essentially good goals of one's country or ideology or organization can lead to suffering. The American involvement in Vietnam illustrates this. We went into Vietnam out of good intentions, to save the country from communism. So convinced were we that our cause was just that we lost perspective and brought great suffering to many people.

When we believe we are right, we must be especially careful lest that rightness become self-righteousness which carries with it a sense of superiority over others and belief that we may impose our way on them for their own good. Good people and basically good nations or groups can bring evil and suffering on themselves and others unintentionally when that happens.

Thoughtlessness, carelessness, self-centeredness, pride, greed, envy — all these and many other "natural" human traits are often at the base of actions we do or fail to do that bring suffering to other people.

Both theistic and humanistic liberals can accept the fact that we humans bring a good deal of suffering upon ourselves. From a theistic perspective this point is made in a humorous way in the movie *Oh, God!* God, played by George Burns, defends himself against the charge that he is responsible for evil by saying, "I did not create the evil; I gave you humans a perfectly good world, but *you* messed it up!"

More broadly, bad things happen to good people because of the interrelatedness of life. Each life is dependent on others for its very existence, its nourishment, for example. We humans feed upon vegetable and animal life; some forms of life feed upon us. The flu virus which recently afflicted me was simply feeding on me as I feed on other forms of life. It was fulfilling its innate need to grow and develop or at least to survive, but in the process it made me suffer.

Life is interrelated. Events that transpire anywhere on our planet may bring suffering upon *us*, just as they may also bring benefits. An assassination, a coup d'état, a hostile act by one nation against another anywhere in our global village may have adverse repercussions elsewhere.

Much of our suffering is caused by nature, sometimes by what we call "natural disasters" and at other times simply by the operation of the laws of nature. To the liberally religious, natural forces that harm humans need not be understood as dispensed by the will of God. There need be no intentionality involved; these things just happen. An earthquake that takes the lives of hundreds of people and

inflicts great pain on countless others is simply the result of geological movements. It is by chance alone that it occurred in Lisbon or San Francisco. Many more earthquakes occur where no humans are involved, at the bottom of the ocean, for example.

Again, the operation of the laws of nature may sometimes cause pain and suffering and death to humans. If a person is killed by a falling rock, that is because the rock was obeying the law of gravity. A plane that loses power on takeoff and plummets to earth, killing scores of people, is obeying the law of gravity. For the most part, gravity is our benefactor. Without it, there would be no planet earth or life as we know it. Yet gravity can be the indirect cause of suffering.

And still again, as Peter Fleck notes, some of our suffering is inherent in the human condition. "There will always be unfulfilled hopes, frustrated aspirations, shattered love, the loss of parents, children, and friends, sickness, and ultimate death."⁵ To be human is to suffer physically and mentally; we cannot escape it.

We are all part of a great living system. We are not exempt from its laws, and sometimes its operations and interactions can result in pain and suffering for one or more of us. That is simply another, a modern, demythologized way of saying what the *Book of Job* counsels. God admonished Job for looking at his situation solely from a self-centered point of view, suggesting that he look at things from a larger, a cosmic perspective. When we look at life and the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, from a perspective that is not human-centered, the question of why we suffer seems rather small up against the vast mystery of existence.

Because liberal theology does not need to find a purpose in everything that happens, we can recognize the possibility

of random occurrences. The world is both orderly and chaotic. Some things happen as a result of order in the universe, but other things occur haphazardly. Knowing that some things happen without a reason makes it easier to accept them than it would be if we believed all miseries are part of God's design.

Knowing that can be a source of comfort as is illustrated by this eloquent testimony I received from a church member:

Our older daughter, her husband, and their two infant daughters died in a fire in their home [several] years ago. If I thought for one moment that this were somehow part of a universal design, or ultimate reality, or God's purpose, I not only would reject God, I would seek to destroy anything so merciless, so wicked. Fortunately, my Unitarian understanding has taught me that part of life is haphazard, senseless, coincidental. Our loss is just as great, but the sorrow, the tragedy, becomes bearable.⁶

A few years ago a young woman in my congregation was diagnosed as having terminal cancer. While undergoing chemotherapy, she received a letter from a fundamentalist minister who said the cancer was clearly God's punishment of her for her sins. Understandably upset and angry, she showed me the letter and asked me why I thought she had been afflicted. After telling her how cruel and unchristian I thought the letter was, I assured her that her cancer was not God's punishment. We tried to find something in her background that might account for her cancer. That her mother had died of cancer as a young woman seemed to suggest a genetic tendency, and we concluded that her illness was simply a case of bad genes. It was purely by chance that she and her mother had inherited a propensity toward that kind

of cancer. It was a case of bad luck, not of being a bad person.

On January 13, 1982, I boarded a plane at Washington National Airport to fly to my mother's funeral. It was snowing hard, and I had some real misgivings about flying in such weather. But I wanted, and needed, to be in Missouri. My plane did not fly that day. Just a few minutes before we were to take off, Air Florida flight 90 crashed into the Potomac River, killing all but five of those on board. It could have been my plane that crashed. That it was not is to some extent a matter of chance. I do not believe I was spared while others died because I deserved to live and they did not. Their plane and not mine had a pilot inexperienced in bad weather flying. Perhaps it was also simply chance that the cancer virus took hold and grew in the body of that lovely little six-year-old girl whom I mentioned earlier.

That some suffering is due to circumstances over which we have no control can be consoling. If, for example, we know that schizophrenia and alcoholism are genetically based, it is comforting to know it was not the nature of our parenting that caused our child to be schizophrenic or to become alcoholic. There are things for which someone is responsible, and it is important to recognize real responsibility. But it is also true that there are things for which no one is responsible. It is important to recognize that too and to know the difference so that we can do something about those things which we can control.

Pain and suffering occur because of thoughtless, irresponsible, malicious, selfish or immature actions of ourselves or others, some of which are intentional and some of which are unintentional, because of the normal operations of nature,

and because of the interrelatedness of all things. There is not a plan or purpose for everything that happens; some events occur randomly.

Liberal religious theists can agree with many of these assertions, since a theist need not see God as using divine power to interfere with either the laws of nature or human freedom. From the perspective of naturalistic theism God is the Creative Power or Life Force within humankind and within all of life that pushes or pulls life and the world toward health, growth, love and unity. That creative force is identified as *good*, but not necessarily as *omnipotent*. It is understood as engaging with us and empowering us in the struggle to overcome the forces within life which cause pain and suffering and evil and premature death, but it is not understood as all-powerful in the manner of traditional theism.

Modern process theology, based on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, provides a metaphysical framework for such a conception of God. Uniting a theistic world view with a modern scientific understanding of the universe, it offers a helpful perspective on the problem of suffering by suggesting, first, that God is good but not all-powerful. God is not in complete control of the world, and therefore cannot be blamed for inflicting pain and suffering. Not power but love is the primary attribute of God. God's power is the power of love. God does not exercise power in a coercive or controlling way. Rather, God's power is the magnetic power of persuasion.

God has certain goals for the world which God seeks to accomplish by persuading human beings to act according to these goals, but God does not or cannot force people to do what God wants or what is best for them. This insight is in

harmony with the understanding that if we humans truly love another, we will not try to control that person. God's love is similar to our own in that regard. This view retains the reality of human freedom, since in freedom human beings can refuse to conform to the divine aims for human life. We may choose evil and in so doing cause pain and suffering. Therefore, "since God is not in complete control of the events of the world, the occurrence of genuine evil is not incompatible with God's beneficence toward all his creatures." ⁷

For process theology, God is limited by the nature of things. God is limited by human freedom with its possibilities for choices that may bring suffering. God is limited by the conflict of human wills that leads to suffering for some. And God is limited by a natural world in which random events may affect human beings adversely.

The divine Creative Force is not something separate and distinct from life and the world, which wills whatever happens. The image of God, drawn from the infant's relationship with its seemingly omnipotent parents, must be revised, as children revise the image of their parents when they learn that their parents are not responsible for everything that happens. The Creative Force may be understood as the power constantly at work within life and the world for goodness, truth, wholeness and beauty. Such a God does not interfere with human freedom or the functioning of the natural world.

Further, process theology also holds that God enters into and is affected by human suffering. God is present in the life forces within the body as it struggles against disease. God shares the pain, assisting the person to find serenity and acceptance even in the face of death. God is also present in

the love and care given by others and in the dedicated efforts of medical scientists to find cures for illness.

What about the suffering caused, not by human error or malice, but by such natural occurrences as earthquakes and tornadoes and viral infections? According to process theology, we live in an imperfect and unfinished universe. Creation is not a once-for-all event but an ongoing, perhaps never-ending, process, and we are a part of it.

We cannot stop earthquakes and tornadoes, but we can and do take measures to reduce the harm they can cause. By learning to predict them, we can warn people to leave the areas about to be hit. By learning to construct stronger buildings in dangerous areas, we can mitigate the destructive force of natural disasters. Similarly, medical scientists can and do develop methods to fight bacteria and viruses so that suffering can be reduced. Smallpox, measles, and polio are three serious diseases which have been virtually eliminated by vaccines. Perhaps cancer or AIDS will be next.

Involvement in scientific and cultural advances which help to alleviate pain and suffering not only enables us to participate in the ongoing creation, but at the same time gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Ironically, the very realities that bring pain and suffering also provide opportunities for making life more meaningful and worth living.

Thus, process theology offers a twofold answer to the question of why good people suffer. Anthony Friess Perrino says it well.

God wanted his children to grow — so he gave them freedom, and he wanted their lives to have meaning — so he gave them an unfinished world with the opportunity to share in its creation.⁸

In contrast to traditional theology, a liberal theology, whether theist or humanist, offers answers to the problem of

suffering which are both intellectually and morally satisfying.

However, the intellectual realm is but one aspect of the crisis of pain and suffering. The other aspect is personal. How are we to cope with pain and suffering when they strike? The next chapter will deal with the resources liberal religion offers us when that happens.

7

RESPONDING CREATIVELY TO PAIN AND SUFFERING

When did we ever learn that life was always
Summertime and Spring and harvest time?
When was it that someone guaranteed a year
of twelve Julys,
complete with everlasting picnics and
never-ending potato salads?
What sort of quaint, mistaken almanac said
Spring could come without December —
That life was all in June —
That May and August go on forever?
Even Winter in ourselves may be the poor
soul's fertilizer,
And Spring within can come only if some
Winter has come first —
Can come, if something like a seed is kept
alive through wintering, to sprout and grow.
Like earth, we have our seasons too.

Max Coots, *Seasons of the Self*

All sunshine makes a desert.

Arab saying

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope.

Romans 5:3-4

Suffering makes men [sic] think, thinking makes them wise, and wisdom makes the world enduring.

The Teahouse of the August Moon

It is important to thinking people to understand why we suffer. However, the greatest problem suffering brings for many of us is not theoretical, but practical, how to endure

pain and suffering and somehow live well in spite of them. For the liberally religious it is a matter of maintaining faith that life is good and worth living in the midst of deep suffering or loss. Viktor Frankl writes that "suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning,"⁹ and he quotes Nietzsche: "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*."¹⁰

The first step on the way to living well in the midst of suffering involves accepting suffering as an integral part of life. To accept suffering is not to encourage it or to imply that we must like it, but to recognize it as a normal and natural aspect of life, a part of life without which human life would be very different from what we know. To accept suffering is to accept the reality that life includes both tragedy and joy. It is also to see suffering as an opportunity for growth and maturation.

In the Buddhist tradition there is a story of a young mother who brings her dead baby to the Buddha, asking for a miraculous resurrection. The Buddha neither grants nor denies her request but simply directs the woman first to find one household that has not been touched by sorrow. Every one to whom she talks has a story to tell about pain or sorrow or anguish, and so when the woman returns from her journey she withdraws her request. Seeing the prevalence of sorrow had helped her to accept her own.

It may seem obvious that since suffering exists, we must learn to accept it. But we live in and are deeply influenced by a society that does not like to face up to unpleasantness of any kind. We put all our efforts into eliminating pain through medication, and we seldom address the issue of how to deal creatively with suffering.

Several years ago I became seriously ill and required hospitalization. While I was ill, I became acutely aware of how great a blessing good health is. As I was recovering, I clearly remember feeling a heightened consciousness of how wonderful life is and how much I enjoyed even the simplest everyday things. I also resolved that when I got well, I would make the most of every day and every experience. Someone has said, "Happiness exists by the grace of a certain amount of unhappiness." The experience of many people corroborates mine. It sometimes takes pain and suffering to enable us to appreciate the joy and richness that is ours just by virtue of being alive. Max Coots put it well.

Winter in ourselves may be the poor soul's fertilizer,
And Spring within can come only if some
Winter has come first.¹¹

Suffering can force us to plumb the depths of our experience and thus enhance our lives and also, then, the contribution we make to the world. Most of us know of people whose lives have been transformed as a result of serious illness or emotional anguish. While in college, my oldest son suffered a potentially life-threatening illness which caused him to reexamine his values and the direction his life was taking. Feeling that up to that point he had lived only for himself and had done nothing to help others, he decided to take a year off from school to work for subsistence wages rehabilitating houses for a non-profit group that then sold those houses to low-income people at cost.

One measure of our lives is the quality of our response in the face of pain and suffering. Our response determines whether suffering has a positive or a negative meaning. The crucial question regarding suffering is not "Why did this

happen?" Rather it is, "What can I do about it?" or "How can I make this meaningful?"

Many examples come to mind of people who have converted suffering or loss into a positive experience. I think of Candy Lightner, whose daughter was killed by a drunk driver. Instead of spending her life mourning or feeling sorry for herself, Mrs. Lightner acted. She founded "Mothers Against Drunk Driving," a national movement against drinking and driving.

Several years ago one of the members of the church I serve was diagnosed as having colon cancer. After conferring with doctors and researching various treatments, he decided to participate in an experimental treatment having a very high remission rate although it was too early for conclusive results. By participating in this program, whether his cancer was arrested or not, his illness and treatment would contribute to medical advancement and hence to the benefit of others in the future. His suffering would have a meaning.

Suffering does not magically or automatically lead to growth or to human betterment. It can also lead to bitterness, discouragement and defeat. Yet it does seem suffering is often essential to deepen our lives and broaden our sympathies. Without our own suffering would we develop compassion and empathy for others when they suffer? Without suffering and the prospect of death would we make any effort to come to grips with the most basic human questions? It does seem that suffering can help us live more deeply and more responsibly, and it is sometimes the case that the experience of suffering is the catalyst for a positive life-change. This whole point was summarized succinctly by Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick. A little boy one day asked him why it was that God put all the vitamins in spinach and not

in ice cream. Dr. Fosdick replied that he did not know why but that life is just that way.

Having said that we learn from suffering, however, I say again, such learning is not automatic. Suffering can also embitter or defeat us. And sometimes the price is too high. What could we possibly learn that would be worth the death of a child? To be made a quadriplegic by an accident is too high a price to pay to learn that we ought to be more careful, or to learn any other lesson. I do not believe God causes such things to happen to teach us lessons we might not otherwise learn. I do not believe we suffer for any purpose of God, as the traditional theist maintains. I do believe that sometimes our suffering may be turned to good purposes. It is a matter of human will, and perhaps grace, but it is largely up to us. As Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Owen-Towle says, "We are broken people, you and I. What matters somehow is whether we become weak or strong at the broken places."

But some suffering is only destructive and without redeeming qualities. I think again of the Nazi genocide, of the sufferings of the people of Southeast Asia, of parents who lose children. Sometimes suffering is senseless and without benefit to anyone. Sometimes the benefits are tragically disproportionate to what is endured. William F. Schulz writes,

Too much suffering can level a human being. It is not for nothing that people erect defenses, choose shallowness, and treasure good, stiff drinks. "Profound suffering makes noble," Nietzsche said. But it also shatters nerves and, much as I revere him, Nietzsche did die mad.¹²

Is life just and fair? Do we suffer to the extent that we deserve to suffer? Are we rewarded with happiness and

happen?" Rather it is, "What can I do about it?" or "How can I make this meaningful?"

Many examples come to mind of people who have converted suffering or loss into a positive experience. I think of Candy Lightner, whose daughter was killed by a drunk driver. Instead of spending her life mourning or feeling sorry for herself, Mrs. Lightner acted. She founded "Mothers Against Drunk Driving," a national movement against drinking and driving.

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Is life just and fair? Do we suffer to the extent that we deserve to suffer? Are we rewarded with happiness and

success insofar as we deserve them? The answer of course is no. Life is not perfectly just or always fair. Much happens that is unjust and unfair. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. By no stretch of the imagination can the Nazi gas chambers or the Soviet gulag be said to have any part in justice. Ivan Karamasov and Dr. Rieux were right. The world is not just and life is not fair so long as little children — and a lot of other innocent people — suffer and die.

Archibald MacLeish wrestled brilliantly with this question of justice in his beautiful modern adaptation of *Job*, his play *J.B.* In many ways he follows the ancient story. J.B. is a very wealthy man with a wife whom he loves and children of whom he is justly proud. He is duly grateful to God for his many blessings. However, as in the Biblical story, one by one his children are killed, he loses all his wealth, his skin is covered with painful sores, and finally his wife leaves him because he will not defend himself. The play takes on a distinctly modern face as MacLeish makes J.B.'s "comforters" speak in terms of three principal philosophies of our time, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and conventional Christianity. Each explains J.B.'s plight from his own perspective. The Marxist proclaims that one person's suffering is inconsequential in the light of History, but J.B. repudiates that idea, insisting that the individual matters. The psychoanalyst maintains that guilt is an illusion stemming from the false idea that we think we are free to make choices. J.B. rejects this too, because to him we are less than human if we are only victims of our instincts. The preacher expounds the unhelpful idea of original sin, that humankind was created evil. J.B. finds that most repugnant because it makes God responsible for evil.

Then God speaks to J.B. using the words from the *Book of Job*. Like Job, J.B. is humbled and repents of his pride in questioning God and forgives God for the injustices he has suffered.

But that is not all. In the final scene Sarah, J.B.'s wife, returns. Her words offer a new perspective. "You wanted justice," she says to J.B., "and there was none — only love." And J.B. replies, referring to God, "He does not love. He is." "But we do," says Sarah, "and that's the wonder."¹³

Writing in this most violent of centuries, with the horrors of the second World War in the background, MacLeish is saying that there is no justice in this world. Nor can we expect to find justice in the universe. The universe does not judge; nor does it mete out rewards and punishments; it simply is. The only justice we will find is the justice we create. The answer to the problem of unjust suffering is not to be found by questioning God or the cosmos; the answer is our love, love of life, love of the world in spite of its lack of justice, and the love we can give to one another.

Then blow on the coal of the heart, my darling

. . . [it is Sarah speaking].

It's all the light now.

Blow on the coal of the heart.

The candles in churches are out.

The lights have gone out in the sky.

Blow on the coal of the heart

And we'll see by and by . . .¹⁴

The answer to the problem of suffering is not to be found in traditional religion or in the creation of a brilliant new metaphysical system that explains why we suffer. The answer is to be found in human warmth and compassion and caring, in our love for one another, a love that includes responsible action on behalf of others and a love of the world.

When we experience deep pain and suffering, there is no substitute for the caring presence of friends and family members. It is comforting to know that others care enough for us to be with us and to share our burden. Before my hospitalization I had often wondered whether the calls I made as a minister on members who were ill were really helpful or just intrusive. But the visits I received, the cards and phone calls and other remembrances helped me to know that I was loved and appreciated and that my return to health was important to others.

The very word religion comes from a Latin word meaning "to bind together." Religion at its best creates strong bonds between people, and those bonds need to be felt and strengthened at times of crisis. The great sociologist Emile Durkheim suggested that the primary purpose of religion in its earliest period was not to "put people in touch with God, but to put them in touch with one another."¹⁵ The religion that does not put people in touch with one another is not a healthy and mature religion.

Sometimes the most we can do is simply to be present and to listen. I think some of the most important hospital calls I have made have been those in which I did not say much. I was simply there. Maybe I held someone's hand. To feel alone and abandoned when we are suffering adds immensely to our suffering. The care and support and encouragement of others can assist the healing process and increase the chances that the sufferer may heal and grow spiritually as well.

Blow on the coal of the heart and we'll know
... We'll know ...

The caring community, the presence of loving friends is a very important resource offered to us by liberal religion

when we experience pain and suffering. So also is the liberal religious perspective on life, on the nature and meaning of human life and of human relationships.

Our belief in the dignity and worth of each person and our faith in the potentialities of each person are important resources to the sufferer. Sometimes suffering reduces our feeling of value and worth, especially if we are incapacitated for quite a while and unable to engage in our usual meaning-giving activities. Able to draw, though, on a deep and long-held faith in our own worth and human potential, we are sustained and comforted. Such a faith can enable us to tap our inner reservoir of power, to endure pain and suffering, and possibly to make it a constructive experience.

Our faith in the sacredness of each person has a bearing on those who would minister to the suffering. For it means that each person's pain must be taken seriously because the person who is ill or grieving or dying is still a person of great worth, not to be neglected.

Our deeply held trust that life is good and worth living can sustain us in the face of adversity and inspire us to find meaning and value even in the darkest moments. It can also help us to keep from becoming bitter or sour as a result of adversity.

A member of a church I once served exemplified this attitude as well as anyone I have ever known. When I met her she had been battling cancer for several years. She was aware that her chances of living much longer were slim. Yet she did not lose hope until the last few weeks of her life, when hope was replaced by a serene acceptance. She kept her sense that life was good and that her work was important.

Liberal religion's emphasis on freedom and responsibility is important in dealing with the prevention of suffering in those cases where a wise decision can prevent suffering. We can choose, for example, not to have an affair that might wreck our marriage and family life. Or, we can act in our freedom to reduce the suffering of homeless people by working together to establish low cost housing.

Our liberal emphasis on reason and the scientific method suggests that we value and support research in both social science and medicine, research aimed at reducing suffering. The importance of medical research in this respect is obvious. Advancement in the social sciences should increase our knowledge of human behavior and its consequences so that we can better understand why we do what we do. If we can increase our understanding of the cause of evil actions, perhaps we can reduce behavior that leads to suffering.

Finally, our "commitment to justice, equity and compassion" ¹⁷ directly addresses one of the major causes of suffering in the world. When I wrote earlier that an attitude of acceptance toward suffering is important, I was not thinking of the suffering caused by unjust social systems. The moral response to injustice is outrage and opposition, what Camus called revolt. Like Dr. Rieux we need to roll up our sleeves and give ourselves unsparingly to those in need. Sometimes that may take the form of charity — giving time, food, counsel, money, etc.— to help the poor and hungry and homeless and deprived. In other circumstances it means working to change unjust social structures at the root of much suffering, structures such as racist and sexist policies which perpetuate economic inequalities.

The final answer to the problem of suffering is ethical action to change conditions that cause people to suffer. Not

all suffering can be abolished. Some suffering is inherent in the human condition; we are bound by the limits of birth and death; all that we love is limited and transient. But some suffering can be alleviated by social action.

In the last chapter I wrote of Ivan Karamasov's powerful rejection of the God of a universe in which innocent children suffer and die. But Ivan's rebellion is not Dostoevsky's last word about suffering. One of the other brothers, Dmitri, is accused of killing his father. While he is on trial, he has a dream in which he is riding through the steppes of central Russia. It is winter, very cold and snowing, and he comes to a peasant village in which many of the huts have been burned down. He sees women and children who are terribly thin and wan. One woman has a baby who is desperately hungry and crying. But the woman's breasts are dry and there is no food. Dmitri asks why the babe is weeping. His driver replies that it is because they are poor and cold and have nothing to eat. And Dmitri, the self-centered, fun-loving, hard-drinking profligate who had heretofore thought of nothing but his own desires, feels

a passion of pity, such as he had never known before . . . rising in his heart, and he wanted to cry, . . . he wanted to do something for them all, so that the babe should weep no more, so that the dark-faced, dried-up mother should not weep, that no one should shed tears again from that moment.

When he awakens from his dream, Dmitri announces, "I've had a good dream, gentlemen." "This," Dostoevsky writes, "he said in a strange voice, with a new light, as of joy, in his face." ¹⁸

If Ivan's response to the suffering of children had been to reject the world and its creator, Dmitri's is to find a new

meaning and purpose to his life, a meaning centered in love and responsibility and service.

Suffering has the power to transform and to redeem. To say so is neither to justify suffering nor to detract from its pain. It is simply to acknowledge that if to be human is to suffer, so also to be human is to be subject to the possibility of growth and transformation which may be born of pain and suffering.

Christian theologian Dorothy Soelle sums it up well when she writes: "Suffering makes one more sensitive to the pain in the world. It can teach us to put forth a greater love for everything that exists." ¹⁹

PART IV

THE CRISIS OF LOSS AND GRIEF

SESSION THREE

THE CRISIS OF PAIN AND SUFFERING

PREPARATION FOR THE SESSION

Participants should have read Part III (pages 55-86) before this session.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- 1) a. It might be helpful to begin by reviewing the contents of chapter 6, "Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People." Ask members of the group to discuss the traditional problem of suffering (If God is good and all-powerful, why does God permit bad things to happen to good people?). Have the group list and discuss briefly the traditional answers to this problem. Are these answers satisfactory?

For example, many people today still find the answer given by the *Book of Job* to be the best answer available. This is the view that the ways of God are beyond human understanding, and we humans should not try to comprehend God's ways. We should just trust that God knows best. What does the group think of this answer?

- b. The book offers a number of answers the religiously liberal might give to the question of why good people suffer. Ask the group to list and comment briefly on these. Which of these, if any, do they find helpful?

- c. Lead a discussion of the differences between the two lists (the traditional answers and the liberal answers). What are the underlying assumptions of the two lists?

For example, the group might say that the traditional answers assume a supernatural deity in control of everything while the liberal list assumes human responsibility along with a world that includes randomness, a world that does not necessarily have human interests at its center.

- 2) The author notes that he, like the characters from *The Brothers Karamasov* and *The Plague*, experienced a crisis of faith as a result of facing the question "Why do bad things happen to good people, especially innocent children?" Ask if any members of the group have experienced a similar crisis and if so would they be willing to tell about it.
- 3) The book suggests that *process theology* offers a more satisfying concept of God and God's role in the world vis-à-vis the problem of suffering. Discuss the process concept of God as presented in the book.

Does the group prefer this concept of God to the traditional theistic concept? Does the group find the process solution to the problem of suffering preferable to that of traditional theism? How do the non-theists in the group respond to this understanding of God? How do the theists feel about this view of God?

Some people contend that the God of process theology is so different from the traditional God that another word or phrase ought to be used. In addition, feminist theology notes that the traditional image of God is male and therefore also often prefers another word. Have the group suggest other words or phrases that might be used for God. Which of these are most satisfactory? Why?

- 4) Chapter 7 suggests several ways of responding creatively to pain and suffering. Review these briefly. Then ask members to divide into pairs and share personal experiences they have had with suffering which illustrate any of these. (Allow 10 minutes for the pairs to talk). Report back to the group.
- 5) Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* seems to say that human love—love of one another, love of life—is the answer to the problem of pain and suffering. Do the members of the group agree? Is human love an adequate answer?
- 6) The book suggests three ways in which the liberal religious community can respond to pain and suffering. One is the presence of caring friends when a person experiences suffering. The second is our faith as articulated in our values and beliefs. The third is to work for the reduction of suffering in the world.

The first of these might be called the pastoral approach, the second the theological dimension, while the third is the social action response. Ask members to discuss any experiences they have had with each of these approaches. Also ask them which approach they prefer to use in their on lives?

- 7) The book suggests that suffering can sometimes be a catalyst for growth. Ask members of the group to share any experiences of growth they have had as a result of suffering.

PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Assign Part IV (pages 89-118) for the next session.

CLOSING

Read the poem by Max Coots at the beginning of Chapter 7 on page 75.

Pause a moment for silent meditation.

Conclude with the following quotation by Dorothy Soelle (found on page 86): "Suffering makes one more sensitive to the pain in the world. It can teach us to put forth a greater love for everything that exists."