

April 11, 2010

*Multifaith Reflections on Suffering
On the Occasion of Yom HaShoah*

*Victoria Multifaith Society
Meeting at Congregation Temple Emanuel*



Judaism

There are several different explanations regarding suffering in Judaism. More traditionally suffering is seen as punishment from Gd for sinfulness, but other explanations see the sufferer as bearing the weight of the sins of others or an innocent person whose faith is being tested.

The traditional response also states that righteous sufferers will be rewarded in the world to come.

A more contemporary response removes Gd as the source of suffering and sees suffering as the result of naturalistic processes or man's free will.

Ultimately, perhaps the reason for suffering is best seen as unknowable.



However the Jewish response to suffering is clear: one must always do what one can to mitigate the causes of suffering.

*This is the concept of **Tikkun Olam**, to bring about the bettering or perfecting of the world.*

*The importance of **Tikkun Olam** and that every Jew is expected to contribute, is seen in the following quotes:*

You are not obligated to complete the work (of perfecting the world), but you are not free to desist from it either.

(Ethics of the Fathers)

Whoever saves a single life, it is as if he saved an entire world.

(Talmud)



A Christian Perspective

Franciscan monk, Father Richard Rohr, wrote the following regarding suffering:



*O*ur remembrance that God remembers us will be the highway into the future, the straight path of the Lord promised by John the Baptizer (Luke 3:4). Memory is the basis of both pain and rejoicing: We cannot have one without the other.

*D*o not be too quick to heal all of those bad memories, unless it means also feeling them deeply, which means to learn what they have to teach you. God calls us to suffer (read “allow”) the whole of reality, to remember the good along with the bad. Perhaps that is the course of the journey toward new sight and new hope. Memory creates a readiness for salvation, an emptiness to receive love and a fullness to enjoy it.



*S*trangely enough, it seems so much easier to remember the hurts, the failures and the rejections. It is much more common to gather our life energy around a hurt than a joy, for some sad reason. Remember the good things even more strongly than the bad, but learn from both. And most of all, “remember that you are remembered by God.”



A Hindu's View

The everyday world we live in is filled with pain and suffering. We as human beings can't help to ask the question why. Why do people get cancer? Why are there earthquakes that destroy entire cities? In the Hindu teachings we learn that to live is to suffer. It is a key aspect in the balance of the universe.

Hindu traditions hold that all things are manifestations of God, so nothing is only good or bad; God encompasses everything. Suffering can be positive if it leads to progress on a spiritual path. Even death is not viewed as end of life; rather it is the beginning of life.



In the Hindu belief system, every person is accountable for his or her actions. That is the basis of Karma. Our lives at any given point are a net result of our past actions. We are capable of good as well as evil, since God gave us intelligence and independence. Our soul, which is immortal, goes through endless life cycles. It somehow carries with it an imprint of our past actions.

*Hinduism embraces the existence of suffering in the world and in doing so teaches the paths for one to be free of suffering and obtain **moksha** which means freedom or liberation, the ultimate human goal. It is also important to note that, while the body may be in pain or suffering, the self or soul isn't affected or harmed. Arjuna, the warrior and seeker of wisdom in the Bhagavad-Gita, is told by Lord Krishna that "The self embodied in the body of every being is indestructible..."*



*Weapons do not cut it; fire does not burn it,
Waters do not wet it, wind does not wither it.
It cannot be cut or burned; it cannot be wet or withered;
It is enduring, all-pervasive, fixed, immovable, and timeless.*

From Buddhism

Buddhism as a faith tradition and philosophy is primarily concerned with the alleviation of suffering. Through alleviating suffering and seeing how and why we suffer clearly, we are able to more authentically live our lives and experience true joy.

The historical Buddha, Siddharta Gautama, left his palace and princely life at the age of 29, in search of how to liberate oneself from suffering. After many years of meditation and following several ascetic paths, Siddharta Gautama awoke to a full consciousness beyond suffering. Two of the basic tenets regarding suffering that were taught by the Buddha are the following:

The Four Noble Truths



Suffering Exists.

The first truth is that life is suffering ie. life includes pain, getting old, disease and death. We also experience emotional suffering, like loneliness, frustration, boredom, fear, embarrassment, disappointment or anger.



There Is a Cause For Suffering.

The second truth is that suffering is caused by craving, desires and the need to control things. It can take many forms: the desire for objects; the desire for money, fame, love; the desire to avoid unpleasant sensations or the desire to maintain pleasant sensations.



There Is An End To Suffering.

The third truth is that suffering can be overcome and true authentic happiness and contentment are possible. If we let go of our craving and learn to live each day participating genuinely in our lives (not dwelling in the past or the imagined future) then we can be happy and free.



In Order To End Suffering, You Must Follow The Noble Eightfold Path.

The fourth truth is that the Noble Eightfold Path is the avenue which leads to the end of suffering.



The Noble Eightfold Path

- 1. Right Understanding - of the Buddha's teachings*
- 2. Right Thought - thinking kind and appropriate thoughts*
- 3. Right Speech - speaking kindly, not telling lies*
- 4. Right Action - not killing or stealing; being kind to others*
- 5. Right Livelihood - doing a job that does not harm others*
- 6. Right Effort - working hard and with good intentions*
- 7. Right Mindfulness - thinking before you speak or act*
- 8. Right Concentration - training your mind to be calm through meditation*

Islam's Remedy for Suffering

*I*n Islam every person is accountable for his/her actions. Our past shapes the future, both for good and evil.

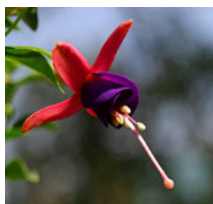
Since Allāh (SWT) gave us free choice, therefore we are responsible for the consequences of our actions.

All things are from Allāh (SWT)



*T*he Qur'an says:

18:29 *The truth is from your Lord. Then whosoever wills, let him believe; and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve....*



30:41: *Evil has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned (by oppression and evil deeds) that He Allāh (SWT) may make them taste a part of that which they have done, in order that they may return.*

17:13 *And we have fastened every man's deeds to his neck, and on the Day of resurrection, we shall bring out of him a book which will find wide open.*

17:15 *Whoever goes right, then he goes right only for the benefit of his own self. And whoever goes astray, then he goes astray to his own loss.*

*N*o one laden with burdens can bear another's burden. And we never punish until we have sent a messenger (to give warning).

31:17 *Keep up the prayers, my son; command what is right; forbid what is wrong; bear anything that happens to you steadfastly; these are things to be aspired to.*



The Sikh Religion

*A*s a Sikh, we must feel the pain and suffering of other people involved in any tragedy. We can't ignore tragedies that take place in the world but must face them and do whatever is possible within ones means.

The Sikh scripture recognizes the five root problems for suffering: Kam (lust), Krodh (anger), Lobh (greed), Moh (attachment), and Ahankar (pride ego). If these problems are eliminated, the experience of suffering is impossible.

In Sikh scripture, the Guru tells us:



*O my mind, without the Lord, there is no other at all.
Remain in God's Sanctuary forever, and no suffering shall
afflict you.*

*A*t the time of India's invasion, Guru Nanak, when he witnessed the suffering of people, complained to God -

*So much agony were they put through,
So much anguish did they suffer -
Were you not, O God, moved to compassion?*



*T*he five qualities: compassion, truth, contentment, humility, and love are essential to a Sikh, and it is their duty to meditate and recite the Gurbani (God's name) so that these virtues become a part of the mind.

Bahá'í Writings

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817 - 1892) and Abdu'l-Bahá (1844 - 1921):

Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power. In like manner, every malady afflicting the body of man is an impediment that preventeth the soul from manifesting its inherent might and power. When it leaveth the body, however, it will evince such ascendancy, and reveal such influence as no force on earth can equal. Every pure, every refined and sanctified soul will be endowed with tremendous power, and shall rejoice with exceeding gladness.



(Bahá'u'lláh)

...in creation and nature evil does not exist at all; but when the natural qualities of man are used in an unlawful way, they are blameworthy.

(Abdu'l-Bahá)

While a man is happy he may forget his God; but when grief comes and sorrows overwhelm him, then will he remember his Father who is in Heaven, and who is able to deliver him from his humiliations.

Men who suffer not, attain no perfection. The plant most pruned by the gardeners is that one which, when the summer comes, will have the most beautiful blossoms and the most abundant fruit.



The labourer cuts up the earth with his plough, and from that earth comes the rich and plentiful harvest. The more a man is chastened, the greater is the harvest of spiritual virtues shown forth by him.

(Abdu'l-Bahá)



Unitarian Reflections

A beloved Unitarian hymn by Ric Masten



Let It Be A Dance We Do

*Let it be a dance we do,
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times and the bad times too,
Let it be a dance.*

*Let a dancing song be heard,
Play the music say the words,
And fill the sky with sailing birds.
Let it be a dance.*

*Learn to follow learn to lead,
Feel the rhythm fill the need
To reap the harvest plant the seed.
Let it be a dance.*

*Everybody turn and spin,
Let your body learn to bend,
And, like a willow with the wind,
Let it be a dance.*

*A child is born, the old must die;
A time for joy, a time to cry.
Take it as it passes by.
Let it be a dance.*

*Morning star comes out at night,
Without the dark there is no light.
If nothing's wrong then nothing's right.
Let it be a dance.*

*Let the sun shine, let it rain;
Share the laughter, bear the pain,
And round and round we go again.
Let it be a dance.*



*Help us to be the always hopeful
Gardeners of the spirit
Who know that without darkness
Nothing comes to birth as without light
Nothing flowers.*

*May Sarton
Unitarian Universalist poet & novelist*

