

## SUFFERING AND MEANING & ETHICS

Bob Mesle (CPS 2/11/03)

- **INTRO:** Sharing ideas about teaching theodicy, and the question, “What do theodicies do?” What problems are people trying to solve?  
**Student comments. Myra: “Suffering is good for you.”**  
**What problem are they trying to solve?**
  - **KEY IDEA: Hypothesis:** Pain hurts more when it feels pointless, meaningless. Suffering is eased by a sense of meaning, of noble purpose, and intensified by meaninglessness. Illustrate: friend killed in war
  - **PREDICTION:** To the extent that this hypothesis is true, what can we expect people to do when they are in pain?
  - **MOST OF THE SUFFERING OF LIFE IS POINTLESS.** cancer, drunk driver
  - **TWO PATHS TO MEANING: FINDING & CREATING**  
One of the most common ways to ease our pain is through religion—by claiming that God (or Karma, etc.) has some secret, hidden, purpose for our suffering.
  - **MY PRIMARY CONCERN: In our efforts to FIND a loving divine purpose in our pain, WE OFTEN CREATE IMAGES OF GOD’S GOODNESS AND LOVE ANTITHETICAL TO HUMAN GOODNESS AND LOVE. What is good and loving for “God” often appears as the opposite of what is good and loving for us. This creates very confusing theological ethics.**
  - **THEOLOGY AS ETHICS: “Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.”** Luke 6:36 NJB If God is good, then we should, in our own way, be like God. If God is perfectly good *and omnipotent*, then everything which happens is something which God, with God’s knowledge and values, decided was best, most loving, and has caused, or allowed to happen. **Theology = ethics.**  
**Examples:** “To teach me how to pray.” Six year old not allowed to grieve.
- TEACHING STRATEGY: SEEK CONSENSUS EARLY**  
**“BAD” = WE WOULD PREVENT IT IF WE COULD. BASIC ETHICS.**  
**SIX RESPONSES—Bad things do happen.**
- **SUMMARY:** In our quest to find some hidden, divine, meaning in our suffering we often distort our concepts of love in dangerous ways.
  - **PROPOSAL: THE OTHER PATH: CREATING MEANING**
  - Create rather than “find.” **Something bad has happened. How shall we respond?** We do it all the time—offering sympathy, bonding, building community.
  - Avoid nurturing theology which provides comfort at the expense of distorting our images of love. (In class, ask for examples of comforting comments to discuss.)
  - **As painful as it may be, there can be real ethical and psychological value, I think, in acknowledging that most suffering is simply tragic and pointless. There can be real value, I think, in allowing people to feel their rightful anger and grief without trying to steal away their right to grieve by saying this suffering is part of God’s loving plan. There can be real value, I think, in seeing that suffering usually comes to us absurdly--without purpose or point--but that it still lies within our power to create some good out of it.**
- FINALLY: D. D. Williams: “Suffering and Being in Empirical Theology”**  
**What are the conditions which help us to create whatever good we can in the face of suffering?**

## SUFFERING & MEANING

Six responses we might have to a painful event

Bob Mesle

Life is complex, interrelated, and ambiguous, and the meaning and value of events can change dramatically over time. Nevertheless, it seems doubtful that every event we experience will turn out to “genuinely good.” This may be suggested by an informal scale of six responses people might have when looking back from a distance on an earlier painful event.

1. I’m glad it happened! However painful at the time, that experience taught me a great deal and led me to explore whole new ways of living. The lessons I learned from that event have far outweighed the problems.
2. It was a difficult experience, but I think it was for the best. It has helped me grow.
3. Well, I’ve learned a lot from that experience, and I’m a better person in some ways because of it. But if I had a choice, I still wish it hadn’t happened.
4. It was a terrible experience. I have learned to live with it and have tried to use it as a learning experience, but it will always be something I deeply regret.
5. It was horrible! Nothing can ever make up for the suffering I endured and still endure.
6. A person may be so crushed (or killed!) by suffering that they simply lose any significant capacity to cope with it in any creative way. It may drive them to withdraw, to commit suicide, to escape into insanity, to become sociopathically violent, etc.

These are merely suggestive of a continuum of human responses to painful events. Some of these are fairly common, others more rare. An excellent #4, or perhaps even of #5, is found in Rabbi Kushner’s book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (Schocken Books, 1981). The book arose from Kushner’s experiences with his son, Aaron, who died the tragic death of rapid aging disease. Part of the power of the book, I think, lies in Kushner’s refusal to be glad about what happened to his son. Toward the end of the book he writes:

I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron’s life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experience, and be what I was fifteen years ago, and average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose. (133-4)

QUESTION: In your own mind, do you think that in the long run all painful experiences will fall under # 1 or #2—that we will be glad they happened? Or will there always be some which are finally, genuinely, bad?

## HOW CAN WE GET SOME GOOD OUT OF SUFFERING?

### Excerpts from Daniel Day Williams

Henry Nelson Wieman and Daniel Day Williams are among those who have asked the right question about suffering. Seeing that suffering is usually destructive but sometimes creative, they asked what makes the difference. What can we do to redeem from suffering whatever good can be achieved?

In his essay, “**Suffering and Being in Empirical Theology**,” (*The Future of Empirical Theology*, ed. Bernard Meland, U of Chicago Press, 1969) **Daniel Day Williams** struggles with this question and suggests elements he sees as important to this work.

### SUFFERING AS IDENTIFICATION

*Sometimes* suffering can help bring us to self-awareness. “To reject suffering, either my own or another’s, as ‘Not-I’ marks the beginning of the loss of selfhood.” 183

### SUFFERING AS COMMUNICATION

“Shared suffering has peculiar potencies. It can, under some conditions, create communities of understanding and mutuality.” 184

“First, there must be an ongoing community of interpretation which gives form to remembered experience and transmits this memory in the historical life of a people. ... Meanings live in historical communities of interpretation.” 185

“A second condition is that the memory of suffering in the past must be accepted and lived with in the present. There must be the will to hear, to recall, to tell about and not hide the unpalatable, even the unbearable reality. Yet, and here I venture a paradox about the creative function of suffering, there must be a kind of forgetting also.” 185

Third, for suffering to be remembered constructively it must be reconceived. Its meaning is not simply a deposit in the memory but material for a new interpretation. ... We reconceive past anguish by seeing it in context, probing its causes, and relating it to new understanding. ... I do not say reconception is always creative of wider community. We can interpret past suffering so that we harden our motives of revenge or self destruction. Reconception is no sure route to communion. But the point is that reconception may take place in the sharing of experience so that the past contributes to the sensitivity and cohesive power of a new community of persons.” 186

“[O]f this I am sure: what is at stake in the understanding of suffering is crucial for the possibility of a humane existence in which we learn who we are and live in responsibility and love with one another.” 186

The fourth condition is “the significance of decision.” “We cannot by decision make suffering mean what we will. ...but one element in the transformation of suffering is the resolve to transform it.” 187

## SUFFERING AS HEALING

“The Discovery of the other who bears the consequences of my suffering and shares my condition is a powerful mode of personal communication and healing. There are at least three elements involved. First, ... Part of the power of healing lies in discovering another who can hear my story, experience my feeling and not be destroyed by it... Suffering becomes constructive only when it participates in structures which have elements of strength. It is the strength which allows the suffering to be faced that makes its transformation possible.”

“The second element is the offer of community in spite of suffering.” 188

“Third, there is the transformation which takes place in the meaning of suffering through love. The hard fact, beyond all sentimentality, is that either we share suffering in love or outside of love, and it is not the same in one case as in the other. Suffering with the other in love becomes a sacrament of the possibility of love in all being and is the deepest source of the transmutation of suffering.”

“There is no guarantee...” 189