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Pain Got Us Here

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On a Tuesday morning a few weeks ago, I bent over to get the dirty clothes out of our laundry basket. When I tried to straighten up, I felt a hot burn pass through the middle of my lower back. I groaned. I couldn't stand up straight. In a few days I was able to walk but a bit bent over and pain was the focus of my life. I was able to do a few other things I needed doing; got the clothes to the washing machine, did some grocery shopping, looked over my email, but the pain was always there shaping whatever I did.

When we are in pain that is what takes over our life, or at least it becomes a major factor in it—whatever else we are doing is secondary. No one needs to tell someone who has had kidney stones, or a broken bone, that pain can be all consuming.

Our sensitivity to pain goes beyond the sensation of bodily injury and discomfort however. In addition to the physical world of pain, we live in a parallel world of thoughts and emotions that produces its own dangers and inflicts its own wounds. Psychic pain is as great if not greater than any pain caused by physical injury. It is the mingling of these two realms, the physical and the mental, that causes suffering and there is certainly a connection between pain and the soul.

Many creatures know pain; we humans know what it is to suffer. When a dog breaks a leg it feels physical pain. But when a man breaks a leg he knows physical pain, but he also knows he might need an operation, that he may face a life in a wheelchair, he may never play soccer or run with his kids again. He may lose his job if he cannot perform as he once did or if his injury takes him away too long.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Rick Bragg, who grew up dirt poor, with a no-account father and a mother from whom goodness flowed in abundance writes, "We went to school at Spring Garden. In the first grade I fell in love with a little girl named Janice, Janice Something. But the first grade was divided into a rigid cast system by the ancient teacher, and I was placed clear across the room from her. They named the sections of the divided classroom after birds. She was a Cardinal, one of the children of the well-to-do who studied from nice books with bright pictures, and I was a Jaybird, one of the poor or just plain dumb children who got what was left after the good books

were passed out. Our lessons were simplistic, and I could always read. I memorized the simple reader, and the teacher was so impressed she let me read with the Cardinals one day. I did not miss a word, but the next day I was back with the Jaybirds. The teacher—and I will always, always remember this—told me I would be much more comfortable with my own kind. I was six, but even at six you understand what it means to be told you are not good enough to sit with the well-scrubbed.”¹

There is physical pain and there is psychological pain.

Anthropologists tell us that it was pain that got us where we are in human evolution. Simple animals and plants with life spans numbering only a few weeks or months come equipped with all the knowledge they need to survive; pain's lessons would be wasted on them. Pain is our teacher, the guide in nature's school of survival. An ant runs ahead of a fire because instinct tells it to, but it is not something it learned from experience. Pain only matters to organisms with an advanced talent for learning, remembering and adapting. So pain is not synonymous with life; it is synonymous with intelligence.

Unless we humans decide to eradicate them, and at the rate we are going we just might, most plants and animals survive because there are plenty of them to go around. A deer eats the leaves off a tree, but the tree survives because the tree produces more leaves than it needs to carry on, so it can share with the deer and survive.

But for some life forms there was a need to survive based not on abundance or mass production, but on the continuation of the individual creature. In their peak reproductive period, women can produce just a single infant each year, and a decade or longer will pass before that infant achieves any semblance of independence. We are a fragile bunch. Compared to other species, our hearing is poor, our eyesight even worse. We are slow of foot and if we don't eat for a day we are ravenous and we feel comfortable only in a very narrow temperature range. Humanity's upright posture frees our hands for useful things but it also makes us easily seen and prone to falling down, or hurting our backs bending over for the laundry. We have been building homes, donning clothes, eating meat and manipulating our surroundings since we emerged from the cave. We control our environment not because we can but because we must out of biological necessity. Pain, or at least our desire to avoid pain, has moved us to find alternative ways of surviving.

This pain we have lived with since forever continues to mystify us. The writer C.S. Lewis has suggested that God allows suffering to command our attention. Pain, for Mr. Lewis, is the Divine Megaphone through which God speaks. Without pain we would not heed our maker nor pay him honor. Lewis is suggesting that God has the power to

create a world free of pain, but chose not to do so out of fear of being rendered unneeded, ignored, and irrelevant. That may be, but I suspect something else is going on.

After he'd been away at several newspapers and was now writing for the *New York Times*, a tornado ripped through the town near where Rick Bragg grew up. The winds destroyed a country church, killing 14 adults and six children. When the storm hit the children were putting on a play. There were screams of pain and fear. Most of those who were killed died instantly.

Bragg traveled home to write the second day story about this tragedy. "This is a place," he wrote, "where grandmothers hold babies in their laps under the stars and whisper in their ears that the lights in the sky are holes in the floor of heaven. This is a place where the song, "Jesus Loves Me" has rocked generations to sleep, and heaven is not a concept, but a destination. Yet in this place where many things, even storms, are viewed as God's will, people strong in their faith and their children have died in, of all places, a church. The destruction of this little country church and the deaths—including the pastor's vivacious 4-year-old daughter—have shaken the faith of many people in the deeply religious corner of Alabama, about 80 miles northeast of Birmingham. It is not that it has turned them against God, only that it has hurt them in a place usually safe from a hurt, like a bruise on the soul."²

Few if any are spared pain and C.S. Lewis missed the point. Suffering is not a megaphone nor is it a rod of punishment. It is an inevitable consequence of being alive and aware. To be conscious is to suffer; it is part of how we got here. There is no answer to why pain, yet because it is our teacher it helps to speak of it, to tell of how it feels, and what it may mean for us.

Sickle cell anemia is a blood disease common in African-Americans. In sickle cell disease the normally round red blood cells become deformed into nonfunctioning sickle-shaped cells, hence the name. Some who get a single copy of the gene have a mild deformity of their blood cells. Those who carry two copies, one from each parent, often die in childhood or early adolescence.

Yet we are learning from studies of native African populations that people with the sickle cell trait seem to be immune from malaria. This means that the mild predisposition to sickle cell anemia saves more lives from malaria than will be lost through the full-blown sickle cell disease. A little bit of sickle cell is good, a lot is bad.

Full blown cystic fibrosis is lethal, but those with a mild genetic predisposition to Cf may be protected against typhoid and cholera. Full-blown Tay-Sachs disease, a neurological disorder endemic to Jewish populations, is also lethal, but researchers are saying a mild genetic predisposition may protect against tuberculosis.³

I share these medical findings, even though I suspect some of you may have contradictory evidence, to remind us that what may appear as injurious may contain a life-saving gift. I do not wish to minimize or trivialize pain. It can be, and sometimes is, debilitating, all consuming and life destroying. Living with pain often means great suffering; those experiencing it deserve care and concern. It would be simplistic and inappropriate to suggest that all pain has a purpose. Yet if the anthropologists and our experiences are right, pain may also contain a gift.

I certainly don't know what my back pain was good for, but perhaps it was to remind me that I am human, that I am fragile, that I ought to take better care of myself, that I ought to slow down, be a bit more mindful of what is central to my being, to take better care of my soul.

The Rev. Dr. Powell Davies, one of the great Unitarian Universalist ministers, once said that life was just a chance to grow a soul. I like that and would add that pain is part of growing that soul for it is part of being alive. We cannot live without experiencing pain and we cannot grieve or suffer if we have not loved or cared deeply about something or someone.

We all know pain—our lives are not complete without it—so perhaps it is not pain we ought to fear, but lives without pain; empty lives, lives that do not know love or challenge or lives that do not build on the gifts we have been given. In these things we may discover pain; we may also uncover our soul.⁴

Perhaps knowing that pain is what we share, that it is what got us here, serves to remind us of what we ought to treasure; the good in our lives, the good we have done to bring us here, what love has given us and what our reaching out can offer to another. We risk pain when we work, when we play, when we offer our hand to another, when we commit to be in that place for which it is good to have stood. To risk pain is a way of creating our soul.

Recently I was having lunch with a friend who was talking about some of the famous people he knew, several renowned authors and political figures—names we all have heard of. As he was talking what came to my mind was that the experiences of these rich, powerful and famous people were no more exemplary than many people who are relatively unknown but whose lives are as noble and brave and charismatic as the notables of whom my friend was speaking. What made each of them exemplary was the suffering they had faced in their lives.

Many of you have struggled with issues that have required strength and courage, many of you have lived through pain, both physical and psychological, demonstrating a depth of character that is admirable and from which others can learn and grow.

Philosopher Elizabeth Spelman suggests that one of the values of suffering is that it acts as a bank. Suffering is the human condition in which the experiences of some can be put to good use by others. Whatever benefits may be extracted from particular forms of suffering need not belong only to those who have endured them, but give witness to that from which others can draw.⁵

And so it has been with many of you. I know enough about you to say you have contributed to the bank that offers strength and wisdom and comfort to others because you have been willing to live and to suffer nobly. Your pain has been part of the bank out of which you contribute to the world.

I suspect that to ourselves we're pretty ordinary, at least on most days, but some days we surprise ourselves, some days we're not ordinary at all, as when we teach a right principle that someone lives by forever, or when we take the dish of stew to someone in a jam, or laugh out loud about our own mistakes, or when we manage to confront what we must in looking toward what is ahead, or when we cry with a neighbor in her grief. Pain taught us these things.

Pain has brought us here, from millions of years to now and from the lives of those who made our lives possible. The humiliation and pain Rick Bragg experienced as a Jaybird in that backwater school may have had more to do with his winning a Pulitzer than anything he might have learned at a prestigious school of journalism. It is what we've learned from our pain that makes us more than ordinary. Pain is our teacher. Let us listen to what it has to tell us.

¹ Bragg, Rick. All Over But The Shoutin'. Vintage Books, 1997. P. 55.

² *ibid.* PP. 246-7.

³ Much of the medical information in this discussion comes from Why We Hurt: The Natural History of Pain. Frank T. Vertosic, Jr. MD. Harcourt, Inc. 2000 PP. 8-33.

⁴ I am indebted to my colleague Mark Morrison-Reed who wrote of death in similar terms in the UUA Meditation Manual Been In The Storm So Long. Skinner House Books, 1991. P. 41.

⁵ Spelman, Elizabeth V. Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering. Beacon Press, 1997. P. 171.