

Engaging Pain
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Episcopal Priest and College Professor Barbara Brown Taylor reflected that she had been teaching World Religions for years before she discovered that many of them grow out of suffering. It's true. Buddhism began when Prince Siddhartha, a spoiled prince protected from suffering, left the palace one day and encountered a sick man, an old man, and a dead man. That experience of suffering shook him to his core. He decided to leave his old life behind and spend his remaining days easing the suffering of others. In fact, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism mostly revolve around suffering: "1) Human life is full of suffering; 2) suffering stems from cravings for pleasure and avoidance of pain; 3) suffering can be eradicated; 4) the path of freedom from suffering is the path of enlightenment." [1] You see, it's all about suffering and attaining freedom from suffering.

The central story of Judaism is the story of the Exodus. God hears the cries of God's people suffering forced labor, beatings, and the murder of newborn sons in Egypt. God recruits Moses who leads the people through the Wilderness and eventually onto the Promised Land. God observes suffering, is moved to do something about that suffering with the help of Moses, and acts to end suffering.

Christianity has its origins in suffering. When Jesus emerged from his wilderness encounter to minister to folks suffering under Roman occupation, many felt that God had abandoned them. So Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, taught people that God's love surpasses all human understanding, and that it's our job to create the Kingdom of God to ease suffering. In Barbara Brown Taylor's words, "His death on a Roman cross became both the epitome of human suffering and the proof that even suffering such as that could not force one chosen by God to leave the path of love." [2]

Finally, Islam began in a cave outside of Mecca, where Muhammad prayed to God for some solutions to the tribal warfare tearing his land and his people apart. The Angel Gabriel appeared and commanded him to recite the first verses of the Qur'an. That night, Muhammad had the start of God's answer to his people's suffering, and Islam would become one of the major religions of the world in time. [3] But Muhammad went to that cave that fateful night to ask God to help ease the suffering of his people. Maybe the Buddha really did have it right from the beginning; human life is full of suffering.

On that happy note, we see suffering today in Luke's Gospel. This is one of Jesus' classic healing moments. A Roman Centurion has a slave who is very ill, near death, actually. And he sends Jewish elders and then friends to ask Jesus to heal his slave. He doesn't think he's worthy for Jesus to even set foot in his house, and Jesus is quite amazed by the Centurion's faith. The slave does become well after this encounter.

The deeper meanings of this story are amazing. The Greek word to describe the Centurion valuing his slave highly is *entimos*, a word also used in scrolls of the time to describe soldiers who performed honorably. [4] It's really something that Luke describes this military man's relationship to his slave using the same word used to describe a soldier performing his military duties honorably. In the Roman domination system where masters were not known to be kind to slaves, where centurions were not known to be kind to their soldiers, Luke wants us to see this Centurion in a different light.

Jesus himself was amazed by this Centurion—he seems to respect and show some dignity to his slave, and he sends people off to see if Jesus can save him. Of course, it's terrible that the Centurion owned another human being, that he was a Roman soldier occupying Capernaum in the first place, let's be clear that the guy is no saint—but Luke wants us to be struck by the compassion of this Gentile within the Roman domination system he is part of. Luke wants his audience to see that the eventual mission to the Gentiles and opening up Jesus' Way to them is not as crazy as it might have seemed at first. Luke wants us to see that there are some diamonds in the rough out there, even in the Roman army itself!

What troubles the Centurion, why this all began, is seeing his slave that he clearly cares about in pain. Out of seeing the pain of another and feeling helpless in the midst of the pain, the Centurion reaches out to Jesus for help. Barbara Brown Taylor points out that sometimes it's harder to sit with someone in pain than it is to feel pain yourself. She sat with many young people dying of AIDS in the 1980s—some of whom never left the hospital, and those encounters fundamentally changed the way she considers pain and suffering. Taylor makes the distinction that pain originates in the body and suffering in the mind.[5] But often when we experience pain in the body, suffering happens in the mind—they are not as distinctive and separate as we may think. Being in intense pain can make you contemplate many aspects of your life, and depending on how this contemplation goes, spiritual suffering and anguish can result.

I know for parents it is terribly difficult to sit with the pain of your child, and it leads to suffering in your mind to see your child grapple with pain you wish you could take away. If there's any silver lining here, it's that engaging your own pain or the pain of those you love doesn't have to lead to suffering in your spirit, it can somehow lead to transformation and healing. Taylor says, "I can try to avoid pain. I can deny pain. I can numb it and I can fight it. Or I can decide to engage pain when it comes to me, giving it my full attention so that it can teach me what I need to know about the Really Real . . . If you have ever made a graph of your life—writing your birthday at the left side of a page and today's date at the right, filling in the major events that have made you who you are—then you are likely to note that the spikes in your pain bear some relationship to the leaps in your growth." [6]

Think about Taylor's observation for a second, the spikes in your pain have a relationship to the leaps in your growth. That is a comforting thought. If we engage our pain, learn from it, and somehow grow from it—at least it had a deeper purpose in our lives. It's the whole that which doesn't kill you only makes you stronger thing.

One of the best examples I can think of for pain teaching someone to know the Really Real and grow in leaps and bounds is Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius was fighting a battle in Spain in 1521 and he was struck by a cannonball, which broke one leg and injured the other—he would limp for the rest of his life actually. While Ignatius was out of action and in great physical pain, I would imagine getting hit by a cannonball would hurt a lot, he decided to study and read and think and pray.[7] Ignatius took that time to spiritually grow, and he took a huge leap!

Ignatius would eventually write the Spiritual Exercises and become the founder of the Society of Jesus—or the Jesuits as they are more commonly known. The Spiritual Exercises remain a classic Christian work of spirituality and faith development. Like Buddhism's Four Noble Truths, the Spiritual Exercises have four parts.

Part One is Purgation—dealing with the problem of evil, and the need for healing from fear, guilt, and a poor self image. The results are coming to faith in Christ, knowing that you are forgiven, and feeling a deep desire to be a disciple. Part Two is Illumination—where you contemplate Jesus in the Gospels and you think about his message. Illumination results in making a choice to follow Jesus—this means gaining some humility and rejecting greed, honor,

and pride, and wanting to fully live in service to Christ. The Third and Fourth Parts are Union with God—where you get strength to carry out your mission for God, where you deepen your sorrow for you own sin and have compassion for the suffering of God's people. Union results in living in the joy of God—where you make a response of love to God's love.[8] The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola have stood the test of time for a reason; they came out of Ignatius' own physical pain and emotional suffering and can speak to others in that place.

So whether we're contemplating the origins of Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, whether we're encountering this Centurion in Luke struggling with witnessing the pain of his slave and reaching out to Jesus for help, or whether we're thinking about Ignatius and his Spiritual Exercises—we know that we cannot avoid pain and suffering. No matter what geographical location, no matter what time period, no matter what religion, physical pain and emotional suffering are a part of being a human being.

But how we respond and what we can learn and how we can engage pain as opposed to numbing it, avoiding it, denying it, or fighting it, is up to us. What lessons can we learn from charting out our lives and noticing the spikes of pain and the growth that may have happened or will happen? What can we do to reach Union with God and living in God's joy? That, my friends, is the real question. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Julia Hardy, "Religion Library: Buddhism" Patheos, <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Buddhism/Origins/Beginnings.html>

[2] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, 156.

[3] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 155-156.

[4] Amy Jill-Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Footnote, 114.

[5] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 161.

[6] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 157.

[7] Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints: From Mary and St. Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Teresa*, 301-302.

[8] Ignatian Spirituality, "An Outline of the Spiritual Exercises," <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/an-outline-of-the-spiritual-exercises/>