

Making peace with a God who doesn't end suffering

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk

I know about the scripture passages that instruct us not to be surprised by suffering and even to be glad and rejoice in it.¹ I've read countless personal stories about the benefits of suffering, and I've heard many people make the case that suffering is the only way to true transformation and growth. But all that doesn't change how I feel about suffering. I'm against it. Flat out against it.

In a car accident in 1980 I badly injured my back. Years later that injury began to damage my spinal cord and impede my ability to walk. A failed attempt to stop the degeneration resulted in eleven surgeries from 2003 to 2005 and complete paralysis from the chest down. I do not rejoice and thank God for what I

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have endured these last several years. I never want to experience anything like it again. And I am not in any way grateful that I can no longer walk.

What are my choices?

Why is this kind of suffering necessary? What kind of God would set things up so that growth only comes through pain? I wish it were different. I wish there were easier ways to grow. I wish God had left suffering out of the human experience. Barbara Taylor Brown says it well: "Christianity is the only world

religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got."² Indeed, that is true. Our God neither prevents suffering nor ends it just because we ask. How are we to understand that reality? How do we make peace with it?

I remember working at these questions several years ago. I was angry and depressed, and I was praying desperately for healing. I wanted to walk more than I had ever wanted anything else, and I kept telling God that. A number of people told me that perhaps what God wanted was to heal me spiritually and emotionally (rather than physically). I would say, "Okay, great. But I want to walk."

Finally, in resignation, I gave up hope of walking again. I told my small group that what made me most angry was the lack of choice I felt about what would ultimately happen in my life. With some cynicism, I commented that I knew I would eventually let God off the hook for not healing me: "I'll come to some acknowledgment of non-physical healing. I will say with conviction that God has been with me through the suffering and that I have grown and gotten stronger because of it. Really," I asked rhetorically, "What are my choices? It's either that or get resentful and bitter. What kind of choice is that?"

God does promise healing if only we ask, and I did ask. I begged and I bargained, but my spinal cord was not healed. I don't know why not. Perhaps God **couldn't** heal me. Perhaps God **chose** not to. Harold Kushner says, "I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die."³ I don't know why I wasn't healed, but I do know that the desire and longing to walk will never be completely gone. Have I let God off the hook? Not completely. I do hold God accountable for not healing me physically. But I am no longer angry. I neither excuse God nor blame God; I simply let God speak for God-self. And I do celebrate healing in other areas of my life, just as I predicted I would.

But that doesn't answer the question of how I reconcile the reality of suffering—my own and the world's—with belief in a God of love. The simple answer is that I don't. And that is one of the most significant legacies of my own suffering. I have simply stopped trying to make sense of it all. My mind cannot hold together a loving God with the reality of AIDS orphans, plane crashes, rape hotels, fetal alcohol babies, tsunamis, and child abuse. So I have stopped trying. It's not that I disengage my intellect to believe in a God who loves us deeply and wants only

the best for us. It is that I have come to accept the extreme limitations of my intellect. It is foolish to believe in a loving God, given all that is around us. I know that. But I have decided that

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not to believe in a loving God simply because I can’t make it all make sense is the height of arrogance and even greater foolishness. (I don’t even begin to understand how a cell phone works!) So I do believe. I choose to believe.

Awash in gratitude

Ironically, with increasing frequency I sense God’s love very deeply. It washes over me in what I can only describe as a profound sense of gratefulness. I do not understand why I

seem to have a more heightened sense of gratitude now than I did when I was fully able bodied. Maybe the experience is similar to the proverbial hitting your head against the wall because it feels so good when you quit. After several years of intense struggle and setbacks, it is so good to feel healthy, to be able to face life without the clouded lens of pain, nausea, fatigue, and despair. Or perhaps I have a new awareness of how truly light my suffering is, compared to that of many sisters and brothers around the world. Perhaps my commitment to gratefulness as a spiritual discipline is bearing fruit. Whatever the reason, I am grateful for the gratefulness, for that unexpected awareness of being bathed in blessings. In those times particularly I am aware that it no longer seems as foolish to believe in a loving God. It seems profoundly real.

My experience of these last years has also increased my awareness of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds me. So many times I have asked, “How do people survive these kinds of traumas without a supportive community?” I do not know. What I do know is that God is incarnated in the loving, caring people who have utterly enfolded me and my family. They were there when my hope was depleted and my faith a bare thread. Sometimes they were my only link to a seemingly silent God. C. S. Lewis described his estrangement from God in the journal he kept after his wife died: “To go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in

your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.”⁴ Why does God turn a deaf ear when we are most in need of divine intervention? How does one hold on to faith, to the belief in goodness and love, in the midst of such utter aloneness? As with Lewis, it was my community that kept me in touch with grace. They walked with me through the valley of the shadow of death. They told me that when I was unable to hold on to faith, they would hold on for me. How can there not be a God, when the evidence of her love is so strong in her people?

Making something holy from the shattered pieces

I have come to understand that the cause of one’s suffering has little relationship with the response to one’s suffering. It is quite

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natural to ask, “Why did this happen to me?” and “Whose fault was this?” and “Why would God let this happen?” But I don’t believe it is ours to know the answers to the cause questions. I don’t believe we really can know. The response to suffering, however, is ours to choose, and therein lies the transformation potential.

My single biggest fear through these last difficult years has been the fear of becoming bitter and resentful. I have seen others become bitter, and I know how much misery it brings to the lives of family and friends, as

well as to the sufferer. I am learning that I don’t need to fear becoming bitter, because it will not happen unless I choose that path. It is God who transforms the pain into good, but it is I who must make the choice for that transformation. Understanding that truth has been enormously freeing. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor says it well: “What the cross teaches us is that God’s power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them.”⁵

There are many other things that I need and want to learn as part of this journey. Two things are especially in the forefront for

me right now. The first is how to be genuinely glad for others when they are enjoying activities that I am no longer able to do. I want to listen to their travel stories, their hiking adventures, their

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conquest of difficult tasks, and be able to celebrate with them. I don’t want my inevitable first thought to be, “I wish I could do that,” or “I’ll never do that again.” It’s unrealistic to think that the longings for lost opportunities will ever be completely gone, but I hope to learn how to keep these reactions well in the background of my mind when I am listening to the experiences of others.

A second area of needed learning is around my self-perception as a person with a disability. I know people hold stereotypes and prejudices about those in the disabled community. One frequent assumption is that we

are somehow less intellectually competent than the able bodied, perhaps because people tend to lump together all disabilities, whether physical, mental, emotional, or developmental. It is difficult to talk about this dynamic. I do not, in any way, disparage those with developmental disabilities or mental illnesses; these have no more effect than physical disabilities on one’s inherent value. At the same time, I don’t want the fact that I am in a wheelchair to cause people to lower their expectations of my intellectual capacity or my mental acuity.

I know people sometimes expect less of me and others in this position. I also know that that awareness can have the effect of decreasing my expectations of myself. There are times when, in hindsight, I realize that what I said or did was greatly—and negatively—influenced by my self-perception that I am somehow intellectually and/or mentally diminished. I fight that perception. I have needed to claim and redeem my identity as woman, and now I also want to claim and redeem my identity as a wheelchair user, a person with a disability. It is my legs that don’t function, not my mind.

Just as there is no neat, easy way to finish learning the lessons that suffering provides, there is also no neat, easy way to wrap up an essay on those learnings. I am glad to be learning. In the midst

of the worst of my suffering, I thought my life was over. I wanted it to be over, and I prayed that it would be. Now I am grateful that my life didn't end. While I would never have chosen this particular path, I am finding meaning and fulfillment as I travel on it. Thanks be to God.

Notes

¹ See James 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:7; 4:12–13; Rom. 5:3–5.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 16.

³ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 123.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 123.

⁵ Taylor, *God in Pain*, 116.

About the author

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