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Theology of Suffering: Getting a Handle on It and
Relieving It by Dianne M. Daniels

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What does it mean to suffer, and further, what does it mean to develop or understand a theology of suffering? Once we understand suffering, how can we then wrap our heads around it and perhaps even relieve it?

For those who adhere to the Christian faith, suffering is a product of “the fall” – the consequences of human sin against God. It’s believed that we experience suffering because we’ve made “sinful” and wrong choices, and that the broken world we live in helps cause some of the suffering we endure.

As Unitarian Universalists, we may more closely relate to the feminist theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, who call out the traditional story of an all-powerful father who would send his son to die on a cross, while saving his other children from an awful fate that the all-powerful father himself ordained.

Ms. Brock and Ms. Parker posit that identifying with the central story of the Christian faith, that of the intentional sacrifice of a “beloved son” by God, his own father, makes a story about child abuse into a narrative about salvation, and makes intimate, family violence into a form of redemption.

This misinterpretation – and I do believe it’s a misinterpretation – has consequences that reach into our closest human relationships and turn them into something much less positive than they have the potential to be.

Brock and Parker, in their book “Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us,” try to understand the origin and effects of the Christian doctrine of atonement., They discover that atonement is NOT what is taught in the bible. It’s an interpretation, as is much of the Bible, since we do not reliably have access to the original materials. The original language it was written in is no longer studied or spoken widely, if at all, and interpretations are always subject to personal prejudice and missed meanings.

Atena O. Danner writes, in her poem “Sharing Losses:”
Loss binds us together undeniably.
Like the aching low moan of a cello – you feel it at first;
Other senses follow – feel it in that place
Where the keening cry of a wounded heart begins.
In loss we could be family.
In that shared knowing and need;
In these chances to rebirth kindness to each other.

In trying to live our perfectly imperfect human lives, to travel the journey from our birth to our death, we are likely to encounter suffering – conscious endurance of pain or distress.

The HealthyJournal.com lists four different types of suffering – physical, mental, emotional, and psychological. Several resources mentioned around these types draw a correlation between a lack of “noble qualities” and the presence of negative emotions like malice and disappointment as sources of suffering.

Most people can probably find areas of their lives that aren’t exactly what they wish they would be – and depending on how you define perfection, it could be said that none of us live perfect lives.

Do we, as individuals, always get everything we want? The obvious answer is no – because even people who have many more material things

than we do may not be completely fulfilled and describe their lives as perfect.

The more we have, the more we want, right? There's always a yearning for a bigger house, a nicer car, finer clothes, gourmet meals, or some such thing. Always the desire for "more."

Human suffering isn't limited to material goods and the lack thereof – oh no – examples can include physical impairment or pain, loss of quality and enjoyment of life, grief, depression, and anger. There is also mention of spiritual suffering – unmet spiritual needs like love, hope, virtue and beauty. To relieve these kinds of suffering, one must fulfill the unmet needs – spiritual care of oneself as well as spiritual care provided by loved ones and a community can be an avenue of relief.

Is it possible, then, to reduce the amount of suffering one must endure (or get through) by taking better spiritual care of ourselves? The foundation of an individual's faith and spiritual life – the practices, beliefs, objects and / or relationships that you turn to for help in times of crisis or concern – can help strengthen you in difficult times.

Finding and developing spiritual resources – those practices, beliefs, objects and relationships – can include music, meditation, prayer, interactions with family and friends or religious leaders, communities like ours that provide support and inspiration, and other methods of returning to a sense of balance when your life has been turned upside down.

We mention in our OOS that we "welcome fellow seekers to consider life's big questions and share our loving community." The acceptance of people from many different walks of life, ages, spiritual and religious backgrounds (or no background at all) makes us special, and I believe, uniquely position to help those fellow seekers to relieve their personal sense of suffering.

There are many paths to relieve suffering – if you find resonance with the Buddhist faith and principles, the teaching of the Buddha says that the way to rid oneself of unnecessary suffering is to extinguish the desire which causes it. It's spoken of in the Third Noble Truth – the possibility of liberation – freedom from being bound to and controlled by desire.

Part of my research discovered four strategies to free oneself from unnecessary suffering, as mentioned on the BBC religion website:

1. Change Your Perspective on Suffering
2. Derive Meaning from Suffering
3. Be Honest with Yourself
4. Meditate on Suffering

The excerpt mentions the book “The Art of Happiness” by the Dalai Lama, and gives additional information on putting the four strategies to work in one's life.

To change your perspective (**Strategy 1**), intentionally try to see a challenging situation as one that has advantages – see the situation from all angles and distances, and you'll find a positive outcome.

The quality of mental flexibility – being able to see the situation from all angles, putting yourself in the shoes of others, and adapting to changing circumstances and new information - provides opportunities to develop empathy and with it, greater compassion.

That doesn't mean you have to change your values or abandon them, but it's suggested that you instead adjust your belief system so that it's built on acting and thinking more flexibly. The Shortform book guide to “The Art of Happiness” suggests leaning on three principles:

1. I'm a person
2. I wish to know happiness and avoid suffering.
3. Others also wish to know happiness and avoid suffering.

Strategy 2 – Deriving meaning from suffering – can seem nearly impossible, but when referring back to the Dalai Lama, it's proposed that finding meaning in suffering makes it easier to handle.

Nurses, for instance, can help improve patient experiences of their suffering by listening with an empathetic ear to patient stories and encouraging them to draw a spiritual or reflective conclusion from it.

During my chaplain internship, I attempted to help patients find the meaning and the benefits of their hospital stay. Reminding them gently that they were receiving care for their ailments and that they could ask questions so they would more completely understand their condition and their treatment plan, and then deciding to work WITH the medical professionals to produce the best possible outcome gave them a break. From seeing themselves as victims and encouraged their inner strength to show itself when it was most needed.

Studies have shown that patients who have a positive outlook on their treatment and who set an intention to create a more positive outcome can have an easier time during and after treatment.

Strategy 3 involves being honest with oneself. In the book guide, the cause of suffering is assigned to the mismatch between your perceptions of yourself and your skills, and your actual reality.

Involving too much ego, and believing that your skill set, for instance, is greater than it actually is, can cause you to suffer when those thoughts occur, as you know they are not true.

Author and self-realization expert Brene Brown promotes the concept of living wholeheartedly, similar to living honestly. Being honest with yourself about your intrinsic value and your shortcomings as a perfectly imperfect human will help you to avoid the suffering that comes with the imbalance of your thoughts about yourself and your actual reality.

We UUS support the principle of inherent value – that we all have it – and when you accept and act “as if” it can help to counteract some of the societal messages that we’re NOT “enough.”

Strategy 4 – Meditating on Suffering – using the practice of meditation to help realize that other people suffer just as we do, thereby realizing we are not alone, and reducing our own suffering.

I think most people would agree that believing you are alone in dealing with a tragedy or challenging circumstance can make the discomfort worse, and can encourage our thoughts and feelings to travel down a darker path.

There is much more than can be learned about suffering and its root causes, but I want to turn now to methods we can use to relieve suffering and lessen it’s impact on our lives.

To lessen the pain of suffering from a lack of material goods, it can help to realize what you DO have instead of focusing on what you DON’T have. Are you fortunate enough to have a secure home or apartment? Even if you believe you deserve a nicer home, you can be grateful that you don’t have to struggle with residence insecurity.

If you’re able to eat what you want when you want within reason, you can be grateful that you are not food insecure and living instead with the challenge of providing a steady supply of nourishment for yourself.

If you have reliable transportation in the form of a personally owned vehicle, you can be grateful that you have the financial wherewithal and consistent access to a vehicle in addition to the funds to pay for fuel, repairs, insurance, and taxes, and be grateful for that.

Our modern society encourages us to want more, spend more, and desire more, but we have the choice to be happy and satisfied with what we have instead of falling into the trap of always seeking MORE.

Ambition is not necessarily bad in and of itself, but when it becomes the driving force behind your actions and causes you to be unsatisfied with your current life to the point where you are not at peace, it's time to adjust.

You've likely heard stories of people who have come to ruin in in their personal and professional lives because of their constant need to do more, have more, acquire more things, and stockpile more money.

There is much more to life than acquisition. Continually pushing yourself to do, have, and be more can be useful when it's done in moderation. Allow yourself to be grateful and happy for what you do have, for the people you have in your life, and for the experiences you enjoy.

Don't become so attached to THINGS that you forget to enjoy the entirety of your life, and definitely don't forget to encourage and support your spiritual self.

Being a part of a community like this one can go a long way toward enhancing your spiritual health. Here you are accepted, encouraged, and affirmed – and when you adopt and implement the UU principles in your life, you'll find a positive source of fulfillment, education, and personal advancement.

Pay attention to as many aspects of your life as you can – feed your physical needs, but don't forget about your spiritual strength and needs. Find and develop a set of practices, beliefs, objects and / or relationships that feed and nurture your spiritual side.