 SPIRITUALITY, EVIL, and SUFFERING
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March 2015

As a trauma therapist, I hear daily how people’s spiritual beliefs can be a deep source of comfort, strength, and wisdom, or, sadly at times, can literally reinforce the messages of abusers.

Abusers tell their victims:

• It’s your fault.
• This is for your own good.
• There’s something wrong with you.
• You are bad.
• If you tell people about this, they will know how bad you are and they will abandon you.
• You are powerless.
• You asked for it. You are making me do this to you. You wanted this.
• I am hurting you to teach you a lesson.
• You will thank me someday.
• Submit to me and give me what I want or I will hurt you.
• Don’t cry. Don’t feel. I will tell you what to feel and think.
• I will sometimes be loving and other times be cruel. This is love.
• This isn’t really happening. You dreamed it. Forget what I just did, it wasn’t real.

The following commonly used spiritual and religious statements echo these abusive messages, and ultimately cast God in the role of an abusive parent:

• Forgive and forget. All people are sinners, so if you want to be forgiven you must forgive those who abuse you.
• If you aren’t “over it,” if you suffer from depression, anxiety, and other trauma symptoms it is because you lack faith.
• Sometimes God has to break us in order to remake us.
• God uses suffering to teach us that we need Him and to rely only on Him.
• Everything happens for a reason.
• What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.
• People attract the lessons they need to learn.
• God is testing you.
• God is in control.
• The body is bad and shameful and a source of temptation to do evil.
• God punishes people who sin and blesses people who are good.
• God is sometimes loving and sometimes vengeful, but must always be trusted, submitted to, and loved.
• Do not question the ways of God.
• Suffering is an illusion based on attachment to worldly things, including oneself and one’s ego.

In this article, I will share how I have grappled with this age-old spiritual and philosophical problem, and suggest possible ways it may be credibly and compassionately resolved. These reflections are a result of my own personal struggle with the question of spirituality, evil, and suffering. I offer these thoughts humbly, with deep appreciation and respect for all points of view, and with my heartfelt wishes and prayers for well-being, loving kindness for self as well as others, soul-deep peace, and ever-increasing strength, courage, and comfort for all people.

Ultimately, what matters more than what we believe is how we live and love and serve.
Theodicy

Theodicy is a name for grappling with the problem of evil and suffering. If the word “God” is replaced by: Higher Power, Buddha nature, Allah, Brahman, Goddess, Higher Self, Karma, Source, Collective Unconscious, theodicy is addressed in every belief system. Each “answer” to the theodicy question is an attempt to solve the often unbearable problem of how to live with hope and meaning in the midst of evil, violence, and suffering.

Theodicy seeks to explain how the following three spiritual assertions can all be true:

1. Evil and suffering exist
2. God is all good (omni-benevolent)
3. God is all powerful (omnipotent)

When people are struggling to make sense of suffering, they have to let go of, or redefine, one of these spiritual assertions.

Usually it is some version of #1, Evil and suffering exist, that is redefined. This inevitably leads to some form of victim-blaming or a minimization of traumatic experiences.

My standard, around which all my reflections about suffering revolve, is this quote by holocaust survivor Irving Greenberg:

“Nothing should be said, theological or otherwise, that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.”

Years later, in need of a way to balance the nihilism this engenders (and after reading too much Camus and Nietzsche), I added:

“Nothing should be said, philosophical or otherwise, that would make their deaths less tragic by insisting that life is absurd, meaningless, and not worth living.”

An Examination of the Spiritual Assertion That Evil and Suffering Exist in a World with an All-Good and All-Powerful God

How can the vast amount of evil and suffering in the world be compatible with an all powerful and all loving God?

To resolve this, evil and suffering are often explained as being an illusion, not real, or a misunderstanding of reality.

Here are the arguments most commonly put forward:

A. “Everything happens for a reason”

In this argument, what appears to be evil is viewed as what is necessary to achieve a greater good. If it is necessary for the greater good then it is not really evil. This is an “the ends justify the means” belief.

Some people find it comforting to believe that something bad is happening in order for something good to come of it, or that the suffering they are enduring is a temporary pain needed to bring about some greater gain. Sometimes this is true. The ability to endure discomfort to accomplish a goal is an essential life skill called self-discipline. It helps people exercise, practice difficult tasks, study, go to work, fulfill responsibilities, and save money. There is an enormous difference, however, between discomfort and true suffering, between pain chosen freely for a positive purpose and pain inflicted through violence.

Sometimes, even extreme pain can be transformed in remarkable ways. When suffering is responded to with kindness, skillful assistance, comfort, and loyal witnessing, survivors of trauma may gain many things, including increased strength, extended resiliency, deeper compassion for others, and powerful self discoveries. It is not the perpetrator of the traumatic experience who gave these gifts, but the supportive allies and a survivor’s hard work!

If everything happens for a reason, most often the reason traumatic suffering happens is because there are people who intentionally inflict pain on others. There are people who are sadistic, selfish, greedy, or otherwise terribly broken, and they make the
choice to do harm. The victim is never responsible for the perpetrator’s choices and violating behaviors.

If a woman is passed out at a party, rape is not inevitable. A man can choose to cover her up and protect her, or simply understand that he has no right to touch her without her consent. In interviews with men batterers they often say that the decision to beat up their partner is made long before she has burned the dinner or otherwise displeased him. The decision to batter is also made before he gets drunk. In fact, the alcohol is often a pre-planned excuse for his later behavior.

Even so called “high-risk” situations are only high risk because of the likelihood of a perpetrator being present. If no perpetrator is present, nothing bad happens. The vast majority of violence and abuse happens in the home or other supposedly “low-risk” places, and at the hands of people who are known and trusted.

Both painful and joyful experiences also happen randomly, being in either the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time. In life there is both randomness and causation.

B. “Suffering teaches us lessons we need to learn”
Perpetration is not instruction. Taken to its logical conclusion, the idea that suffering teaches us necessary lessons implies that the victim should send the perpetrator a thank you note on Teacher Appreciation Day for teaching him or her a lesson.

Abusers are NOT instruments of cosmic goodness, but of destruction and harm. Any healing, growth, or deepening of soul that comes out of destruction is because of the love, the support, the inner resiliency, the courage, and the hard work of survivors and their allies. The evil-doers do not get credit. They are not the in the service of God, Karma, etc. They are working against the evolving spirituality, light, love, and compassion at work in the world and within each soul.

It is important to distinguish between the necessary sorts of suffering that are inherently part of being human from traumatic suffering that is the result of violence, torture, and cruelty. Necessary suffering includes: growing pains, healing pains, the natural cycles of living and dying, creation and dissolution, mistakes and amends-making. This suffering is universal, and embedded within it is the potential for the comfort of connection, loving memories, shared humanity, and even beauty.

Grief and loss, growing pains, humbling moments of mistakes, and the painful vulnerability of amends, these sorts of suffering do indeed mature us and help us evolve spiritually. These are not “sent” to teach a lesson. They are the result of the laws of nature and human imperfection. How we choose to respond determines whether we grow, mature, deepen, and increase in empathy and compassion, or allow our pain to make us bitter, despairing, and closed-hearted.

Traumatic suffering, on the other hand, is caused by abuse, neglect, violation, and atrocity. In my personal experience, and sitting with clients describing unbearable horrors, I am unable to abide with any belief that suggests that extreme suffering is purposeful, to teach a lesson.

No child is born and cursed to a life of suffering to learn lessons. All children are born blessed within, spiritually, which makes the injustice of the global inequalities of our world all the more tragic. Children achieve their fullest potential through being nurtured, taught, allowed to struggle, to safely fail, to make mistakes, to make amends, to experience both hurt and healing, and to know that all these are part of being human. Shame, terror, unbearable pain, and traumatic suffering are not teachers. In fact, when the mind/body/spirit are overwhelmed, the frontal lobes of our brains, which are essential for learning, are literally shut down.
C. The Law of Attraction

The Law of Attraction puts forth that every positive or negative event that happens to you is attracted by you. They are your thoughts manifest, and make your reality.

This idea has been around for a long time, but was made popular recently by the book The Secret. The Law of Attraction states that everything that happens to you, positive and negative, is caused by your thoughts. Whatever you focus on will be attracted to you. Negative thoughts cause negative things to happen to you, and positive thoughts cause positive things to happen. People are taught to ask the universe for what they want and think positively, expecting these things to happen, including obtaining items of material wealth and cures for diseases.

The problem is that this often leads people to become phobic of the healthy range of human emotions and to avoid people who are experiencing suffering. This belief system often becomes a block to compassion, support, and intimacy.

It is normal for people to have all sorts of thoughts, positive and negative, anxious and hopeful. Many mental health interventions are intended to help people understand that they are not their thoughts, that their thoughts are not magic, and that having a thought does not cause something to happen outside of their mind. Those whose hearts are open to the tragedies, as well as the joys, of others often report higher levels of satisfaction with their lives. Those who choose to live simply and not to pursue excessive material wealth also score higher on happiness inventories.

Human beings are not islands of isolation where causation is linear and immediate. We live within circles of community, of family, of relationships, and are even effected by ripples that past generations set in motion. There are numerous and complex influences that have an impact on us at any moment, many of which are beyond our control. We live in an interdependent ecology in which all aspects of creation are so interconnected that they cannot help but effect one another.

Almost every spirituality has the concept of meditating on, or praying about, your goals, and seeking to set yourself in the creative, spiritual flow that will guide you to reach them. This may include:

- Getting in touch with your deepest dreams and yearnings,
- Writing down your goals, and being mindful of choices that are in sync or out of sync with reaching them,
- Seeking the wisdom of your intuition as well as your rational mind,
- Seeking connection with God, spiritual guides, and people you trust.

All these actions are considered part of a spiritual discipline that can help people fulfill their life’s purpose. Spirituality can be part of both setting and working toward the goals that are part of that. In most spiritualities the idea of setting goals for obtaining more material things than necessary is discouraged.

D. “Karma”

I love many aspects of Buddhism and I am a grateful follower of many Buddhist practices, especially Metta, the loving-kindness meditation. I believe the Dalai Lama is an embodiment of sacred compassion and wisdom. I don’t pretend to understand the complexities of Karma as Buddhism teaches, but out of my experience, I reject the notion that whatever someone is experiencing in this life is because of what they did or didn’t do in a past life, and that, therefore, the suffering they are experiencing is because it was needed to evolve their soul.

I cannot place this statement, “Whatever happens in this life is a consequence of what you’ve done in a past life,” next to burning children. To interpret the meaning of Karma in this way is to insist that the universe is “just” and “good” by saying that atrocities are necessary and even instruments of healing and purification.
Tremendous growth may be possible in the healing process, but traumatic suffering neurologically inhibits the healing process, making growth much harder. Extreme suffering makes just surviving an overwhelming effort. People who have experienced horrific events find themselves not only in pain but also suddenly blocked from access to the innate, hard-wired healing resources within their body/minds.

The biological mechanisms for processing trauma, then archiving it in the brain as something that happened and is NOW OVER, are disrupted by the physiology of survival terror. The hippocampus, that part of the brain that sorts and archives experience, is shut down, leaving the trauma locked in the brain’s right hemisphere, stored in fragmented capsules of vivid sensory experience and strong emotions.

Survivors of abuse are often consumed with self-loathing. They may fear allowing themselves to experience positive emotions because relaxation and happiness lower their defensive armor and cause them to become flooded with trauma memories. In cases of extreme abuse, many survivors were calculatingly programmed by their abusers to self destruct if they feel an impulse of compassion for themselves, or any self-affirmation that would undo the abusers’ control over their lives. All people are born with intrinsic healing capacities. In cases of extreme abuse the perpetrator not only inflicts suffering but also attacks the victim’s innate resources for healing.

For me, it is essential to affirm that all children are born good, full of blessings and potentials, innate compassionate capacities, brimming with light and love, yearning for safety and connection in addition to the potential for aggression and cruelty. The triumph of healthy development, the achievement of their soul’s purpose, is best served when they are well cared for, fed, soothed, and celebrated, and when they are supported to grow in resiliency through the naturally occurring difficulties and sufferings of life, and the ebb and flow of pain and relief, tears and laughter. Patterns of aggression and cruelty have been shown to be linked to extreme childhood neglect and abuse. The difference between survivors who become perpetrators and the majority of survivors who do not go on to abuse others, is whether they developed empathic connections to other beings, even to an animal.

We learn life lessons best when they are taught with love, with patience, and with a profound, unconditional belief that children and all human beings are meant to thrive, to have joy, to heal, to be comforted in grief, to gain strength and courage, to overcome adversity, and to live in empathic harmony with self and others. I believe it is essential to assure them that adversity is not being sent to them to refine them like they are metal in a fire, but because that is simply part of being human. It is the warmth of loving connection and healthy self worth, the hard, hard work and the courageous power of standing in the truth of one’s life, that may transform suffering — even extreme suffering — into infinite possibilities. Karmic destiny is fulfilled in spite of evil, not because of it.

A final note: I once had a client who was very attached to her suffering as a way of achieving enlightenment in the next life. I suggested gently, hesitantly, if she might have chosen to become embodied in a horrific situation as a way to bring healing and hope to others who suffered as she had. In other words, I suggested that she may have chosen her path, not because she had to experience horrific abuse to attain enlightenment, but because in her soul’s compassion, perhaps she looked upon the suffering of others and chose to enter into it to help transform it. This was, for her, a powerful and helpful shift for her depression. I’m not saying that would work for everyone, but perhaps it could change the experience of being “cursed” and deserving their fate, into a more heroic story, which is much more accurate.
E. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”
This premise is absolutely NOT true. Suffering often kills, if not physically, then mentally, spiritually, and morally. Every 65 minutes a combat veteran commits suicide. The Adverse Child Experience Study (ACES) proves a strong correlation between child abuse and neglect and both physical and mental illnesses. All too often, suffering breaks people.

I repeat: When people do emerge from hell and heal and are even, some of them, especially strong at the broken places, it is my experience and my belief, that it is because of the love, the comfort, the attuned connection, the listeners, the helpers, their own inner wisdom and healing abilities, their courageous hard work, and determined, tenacious struggling to heal. It is NOT the atrocity that made them strong. The good that is at work in their lives — the care of others, the courage and the hard choices they make every day to live and to heal, — deserve the credit for their healing, NOT the perpetrators. Again, I REJECT anything that implies that they must someday thank their abusers for “helping” them.

An Examination of the Spiritual Assertion That God Is All Good, Even Though There Is Evil

A. If God is all powerful and evil/suffering/atrocities happen, then how can God be all good?
There are versions of redefining the goodness of God in every spirituality — making God exempt from morality, outside of ethical standards. It is common in many religions to invoke an angry, vengeful, even violent, deity at times and tell sacred stories of the deity behaving in immoral and destructive ways toward humankind to either execute punishment or bring about some greater good.

Even the notion of hell, sending people into an eternity, forever and ever, of torture and pain, is considered an appropriate response to “sin” by a “good” God. Some religions have different deities that “destroy” or make war. Some refer to different faces of the divine. Some state that there is a “shadow” side of God. The message is that fear is part of faith. They teach followers ways to appease the wrath of God. This includes teaching that people should pray, perform rituals, make offerings, or otherwise cajole the deity into mercy.

This is chilling in its similarity to the way abused children respond to those who hurt them, especially when they are being abused by their parents or by people they are attached to, dependent upon, or love. It reinforces the distorted, but common, perspective that victims bear responsibility for abuse because the abuse could have been prevented if only they had prayed the correct prayer or performed some other placating action. I believe the opposite is true. There is healing when victims are able to connect to their anger at the abuser, to shift from appeasement to protest, to know bone deep that there is nothing they could have possibly done to deserve being abused.

I am an avid student of the novels of holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, because his books are a powerful description of his healing journey. In his
first novel, Night, Wiesel describes, in excruciating
detail, his experiences as a child in a concentration
camp. There is no hope, no comfort, no
meaning-making. There is only a survivor speaking
of the evil endured, telling the story, and asserting
that there is meaning in telling the story, if only
to fulfill his promise to bear witness on behalf of
those “turned to smoke.”

In his book, Dawn, the character decides whether
he will kill to take revenge. In The Accident, the
character wrestles with the pull to commit suicide.
In Town Beyond the Wall, he takes on those
who stand by and do nothing, the culpability
of those who hide behind their “neutralirty” as
spectators and observers, as if not taking sides can
keep their hands clean.

In Gates of the Forest, living becomes a protest
against an all powerful and morally corrupt God.
There is a scene at the end of that book that I must
have read a hundred times. Holocaust survivors are
ecstatically dancing, angry, defiant, pronouncing
God as less moral than they are and that God is
the one in need of forgiveness. In that moment of
rage, however, they are deciding to live if for no
other reason than to protest against an unjust God.

There are no platitudes in Wiesel’s novels, no
happy endings, no whitewashing of the agony of
surviving and the ambivalence of living. But there
are moments of human transcendence, courage,
tenderness, love, compassion, and healing.

I will never forget the
moment when I saw
a newspaper photo of
Elie Wiesel throwing
out the first baseball in
the 1986 World Series.
It is one thin moment
of simple happiness
that stands in profound
contast to the thousands
of words he’s written that
paint pictures of horror and evil. It is especially
meaningful because he is not a baseball fan. He
only agreed to throw the ball because of his son’s
excitement about him doing it. I have a copy of the
photo tucked away in our fireproof safe with our
important papers. It sounds ridiculous, even silly,
but this little newspaper clipping, showing the look
on his face that is boyish and playful, connected to
the happiness of his son, is sacred to me.

B. “God is testing me”

If this premise is true, then God is sadistic. Any
parent or teacher who causes harm to students, and
inflicts pain and suffering to “test” them, would be
considered immoral. What exactly should infliction
of suffering measure? If God is “all knowing,” why
would testing be necessary? Profound suffering
— as differentiated from growing pains — is
not instructive. It is destructive. Again, what
transforms all suffering is love, care, support,
compassion, and comfort. For me, THAT is where
the Holy is found, as a Source for healing, comfort,
and transformation, and not as the source of
the torment.

Once suffering has overwhelmed and broken
the mind/body/spirit — causing Post-traumatic
Stress Disorder (PTSD), Complex PTSD,
Dissociation, Dissociative Identity Disorder — it
cannot be called a test. Torture is toxic. Cruelty
is catastrophic. Sadistic hunger for the pain of
others and the need for control over their minds,
spirits, and bodies is an atrocity. All of these are
evil. When inflicted upon children, these harm
our very DNA, and create cycles of abuse that
corrupt generations that follow.

If we do not heal our shared human potential
for these kinds of extreme violence, for genocide,
for war upon war upon war; if we do not protect
all children and teach them how to nonviolently
seek justice, and to make peace within and
between, humanity will not survive.
An Examination of the Spiritual Assertion That God Is All-Powerful, Even Though There Is Evil

I have had to let go of and redefine the notion of an “all-powerful” God. I miss it. I often find myself inadvertently believing it again, especially in moments of sudden fear (like airplane turbulence and medical scares), seeking comfort from it again, and that, too, is human.

For me the only spirituality I can credibly place next to Greenberg’s quote about the burning children is rooted in, and adapted from, Process Theology. From here on I will write Higher Power or G_d instead of “God” to convey that I am not referencing the traditional God, and not even describing a deity per se, much less a male gendered one. When I write Higher Power I am referencing the Source of love, life, connection, healing, compassion, courage, justice, radical possibility, and creativity. Higher Power is beyond religion and even spirituality because secular humanists and those who don’t believe in soul/spirit usually do affirm that there are non-tangible realities like love and compassion, unity, and collective wisdom and power.

Process thought offers that it is the TYPE of power that needs to be reconsidered. We are conditioned to imagine power as force, domination, and/or combativeness. For Process Theology, the highest power is not force but love, not domination but compassion, not competition but connection and collaboration. Higher Power and humanity, indeed all of creation, are interdependent.

For Process Theology, there is no God “up there” who is going to come down and fix things for us and magically save the day. At every moment a Higher Power is actively, passionately, powerfully at work to bring about the best possible outcome. Also, at every moment this is but one power among many, notably human free will and natural laws, and is, therefore, necessarily limited. No matter what is happening, this Higher Power is at every moment working with us to bring about transformation, peace, solutions, and healing.

This is in line with Mr. Rogers’ message to children: When bad things are happening, look for the helpers. Stories of helpers, of kindness, and of courage were true in the horrors of the concentration camps, in the barbarity of slavery, and in places of genocide and epidemics. There are, everywhere and in all times and places, ordinary heroes and heroines acting with courageous compassion, self-sacrificial generosity, and quiet humility. That is how Higher Power works. What we do matters. We are co-creators of reality. G_d is at work doing what only G_d can do and we are called to do what is ours to do: To serve, to offer our presence, our abilities, and our efforts.

Praying, meditating, performing rituals, making offerings, and other spiritual practices become ways of connecting more deeply to the presence of G_d, to the energies of transcendent guidance and help, and to the power of loving connections to our own body/mind/spirit, as well as between one another. The complexity of our human capacities for both kindness and cruelty, and service and selfishness are explored and accepted instead of denied. This reduces the need to project what we’re ashamed of about ourselves onto others.

- When we believe that the ultimate power at work in the universe is nonviolent, then nonviolent resistance becomes our power, too.
- If we believe that there is a power at work in the universe that is infinitely creative, then every moment is full of possibility and hope.
- If we believe that no matter what happens, our soul — the essence of who we truly are — is eternally part of, connected to, and infused with the Sacred (by whatever name), then everyone is equal and worthy of deep respect, and we are all spiritually eternal.
- If we believe that everyone has a sacred path, a unique calling, and special gifts and abilities to contribute, then we are pulled beyond competitiveness fueled by ego and instead we instinctively encourage, support, and celebrate each other.
- If we believe that when bad things happen there is a Higher Power working to create new paths and new possibilities, working for us not against us, there is comfort.
• If we understand that we are interdependent and interconnected with the earth and all living things, models of domination and exploitation fall away.

• If we believe that anger is a spiritual gift meant for helping and protecting, not vengeance or violence, then we become empowered to seek justice and speak truth to power.

• If we believe that Higher Power is within and between us, and is interdependent with us, then the question changes from “How could God let this happen?” to “How can I be part of the creative, compassionate, loving power at work in all that is and is to be?”

May the power of compassion and loving kindness for self and others, and the power of courageous gentleness and humble self awareness be yours in all that is and is to come.

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