

Without an Invitation
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There was a day last spring when I was in too much pain. My back had ached for several weeks, but then the day came, the day after Mother's Day, to be precise, when the pain was different, worse, unrelenting. Fortunately, I did not know then that this was my first day of chronic pain, and that it would last for over six months. I just thought I was having a bad spell, and if I rested (right), I would get better.

The human body houses a versatile, but limited system. We can say or do what we want, but our body knows our own limits, and only the most self-aware among us can hear those limits before we have crossed a line of damage that leads to pain. Yet, even those who are self-aware cannot avoid all pain. No one is that powerful, that all-knowing. How can any of us know that today is the day we "shouldn't" mow the lawn, put on our gear and go out on the field, get in the car, shouldn't have that minor procedure that might lead to unexpected physical damage. Life happens, pain happens. Pain is an ineradicable part of life.

And of course there are so many kinds of pain; acute pain, chronic pain, emotional pain, physical pain. I apologize to those of you who have just endured Valentine's Day. This might not be the uplifting "day after" sermon you were hoping for, but the creative process cannot be controlled by the holiday calendar.

The focus for this morning's sermon will be chronic pain, that is continual pain that lasts for more than a few months. Chronic pain is not a little muscle ache, which will naturally heal up in a few days or weeks. Chronic pain is not recovery from surgery, which progresses if all goes well. Chronic pain is not acute pain, which comes on strong, and then recedes. Chronic pain remains, through the day and night, whether standing or sitting, working or resting. Chronic pain is relentless, and at times nothing can make it better.

This week I heard a report on NPR that stated that on a daily basis 1 in 5 Americans experiences chronic pain. In a way I am surprised that the number is so high, but in another way, I am not surprised at all. I am currently undergoing my second round of physical therapy this year. And in its own silent and intensely private, unintentional way, physical therapy is a form of group therapy.

I have never been to a physical therapy studio that didn't have stations immediately next to one another, so without even trying I hear the stories of other people. I hear conversations like this: "How long have you been in pain?" "Since 1987." or "On a scale of one to ten how would you rate your level of pain?" "Probably eight, and I start a new job on Monday. Can you help me?" At physical therapy I see business people, athletes, grandparents, college students, people struggling with accidents, surgery, inherited problems, illness, and mystery pain – people of all ages, races, weight and health status. This isn't just about whether or not you are physically fit. At my current physical therapy studio I see dancers, a pre-teen with a leg injury, a former professional

ballerina with a hip problem. I can't point my toes like them, but I recognize the haunted, pained looks on their faces. That used to be the look on my face. Physical therapy is a humbling reminder of life.

At church I have found the same story. When people learned that I was having back pain, they would quietly tell me or sometimes write to me things I hadn't known about them. And this surprised me, people I have known here for six years. I have been in their homes, I have helped them with rites of passage, and only now do I hear things such as "I have to wear a corset when I travel," "I haven't slept well for the last six months," "I still have pain from a childhood accident," "For the last twenty years I have worn orthotic inserts in my shoes and lifts on all my heels, and I still have pain." I have been sobered by the number of people, often quietly (to the outside world) living with pain. Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl writes, "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete."¹

Frankl is on to something whether we like it or not, suffering is an integral part of life, just like happiness, only much worse. Without suffering life is not complete. Obviously this brings religious and existential questions to mind. "Why does suffering exist?" "Is God responsible, and if so, why does he or she allow this to happen?" "Is suffering a sign of failure, a sign of fault in the eyes of God or life?" "Have I brought this upon myself?" "Am I useless because I am now limited or hurt?"

When I was in seminary I took a class entitled "Perspectives on Evil and Suffering in World Religions." Even ten years ago this topic was of interest to me. The dilemma of evil and suffering can make or break individual theology. One unit of hospital chaplaincy taught me that. I still remember the bereft and enraged woman talking to me on the oncology unit. How could God let her husband get cancer? He was not yet sixty. They were good people. They went to church, did missionary work. How could God do this to her? So how could God do this to her? I thought I would take a class so I could figure this out.

In class we learned about Judeo-Christian thought that we suffer for our sins. We learned about centuries of Jewish thought, including the thought that suffering as an affliction of love (my take on this one being "if this is how you show love, you can put your love....."). We learned about suffering as a mystery of God, or perhaps a sign that God is not all-powerful. In *Job*, Job suffers from great personal loss due to a capricious God. What is worse, he is then visited by his friend who tell him things like "God punishes the wicked." Job calls out over and over to God, who finally responds "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" I recommend that you all go home and read *Job* just to remind yourself what not to say to a person who is suffering. (God also restores Job's fortunes).

We studied Christian thought and learned that since Jesus suffered more to bear our sins, so we should bear our suffering with grace. In the *Letter of Paul to the Romans*, Paul writes, "we also boast in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." (Romans 5:3-4). This my friends, is why centuries of parents have told their children "suffering builds character." What I most dislike about this line of reasoning is that it closes dialogue and

¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 76.

curtains sharing, as in "shut up, suffering is good for you." From the perspective of Biblical criticism it also ignores the fact that Christianity was created in a time of chaos and persecution, so of course early Christians were told to bear their suffering. Paul was not a systematic theologian. He was an evangelical pastor sending letters of encouragement to diverse groups under siege.

We even studied Hinduism which has so many ideas about suffering that you can just pick which one appeals to you at the current moment (and this is what Hindus are encouraged to do). We learned that the world is illusory so suffering is illusory (that's nice, but it still hurts like . . .). We learned about karma, which is a response reaction to good and bad actions, which can just make the suffering person responsible for their own suffering. Not very good pastoral care.

What I learned is that for me, there is no entirely satisfying theological answer to the question of why people suffer, and many theological answers are dismissive or damaging to those who hurt. It occurs to me that all the theology, education, and knowledge in the world can't save us from pain or enable us to help someone in pain. I found the class interesting, with topics for hours of fascinating discussion, but fundamentally irrelevant to the physical experience of suffering and chronic pain. You can't just be in "the head" when helping someone in chronic pain. Chronic pain is a whole mind, body experience. And in our class, we studied no religion that offered what I think is needed, an intimate understanding of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual human experience of chronic pain.

Any good information I have about pain comes from humans who have been able to survive and articulate their experiences. In *Man's Search for Meaning* Viktor Frankl writes

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there are always choices to make . . . Dostoevski said once, "There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings."²

My husband maintains that all deaths are dignified, no matter how terrible, unjust, or cruel the circumstances, because life itself is dignified. I have thought about this for several years, and have decided that I agree with him. This perspective keeps power with people who suffer and die. It maintains that no one can rob anyone of their inherent dignity; no one can be victimized out of their dignity. No person or force of nature has the power to do this to another human being.

This has made me think about suffering. Although I do not believe that suffering "builds character," or that suffering is an affliction of love, I do believe that each of us has the power to make choices worthy of our inherent dignity and suffering. As Frankl so knowing writes "Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete." Suffering is part of our story here as humans in the world. So how can we embrace this story with the most dignity?

² Frankl, 75.

To begin with, we need to understand suffering as normal, a sign of life, not of failure, punishment, weakness, or death. Because suffering is a sign of life it is also random, unexpected, and unfair. So many of us have a silently internalized theology that if we are good and do good, good things will happen to us in return (like the couple I met in the hospital). But bad things do happen to good people.

My Aunt Shirley was diagnosed with colon cancer two years ago. As many of you know, colon cancer is an aggressive, dangerous cancer. My aunt is now actively dying and I ask myself "Why her?" If good people should only experience good things, my Aunt should live to a healthy 100 years of age and die a peaceful death. Aunt Shirley is the best one in an opinionated, stubborn family. She is kind, generous, forgiving, loyal, and patient. I can only vaguely understand her suffering because I believe that life, while a wonderful gift, is also random, which also makes it unfair.

Without suffering, human life would not be complete. I have no logical answers for this my friends, no traditional theology to ease my loss. I just know it is true because I have seen it over and over again. We don't suffer because we are stupid, unimportant, useless, or unlovable. We suffer because we are human.

The Ritual/Life Cycle Committee at Congregation Beth Adam, our humanist Jewish neighbor in Loveland, has recently published a booklet entitled *Beyond the Silence: Readings for Times of Crisis*. Our first reading this morning, entitled "Without an Invitation" is from this book

The star signs have shifted, are out of order
 Fate arrived without an invitation
 I thought it would be like lightning, piercing and swift
 Instead, working secretly in the background,
 Life has changed the rules
 I can fight
 I can accept
 I can heal
 Each has a place and a time
 If I look only to tomorrow,
 I may forget today.

This is a wonderful reading about suffering. It articulates one of the most difficult elements of pain; it arrives without an invitation, secretly in the background, and the rules of life have changed. One of the most difficult challenges for people in pain is the experience that life has changed, and we can't remember receiving a reminder that this was going to happen. For most of us with chronic pain there was a day we may (or may not) have had discomfort, but suddenly there is the day when the pain is unrelenting. And when it doesn't relent in the near future we are stunned to realize that it is chronic. This does not seem fair. The rules have changed, and we must change in response. But we weren't warned (or if we were, we can't remember), and now we must change, change, change. No matter how powerful or important we are, the rules of life have changed so we must change in response.

Frankl maintains that the last human freedom is the freedom to choose. In times of chronic pain we have the freedom to choose how to respond and how to change. We

can put ourselves first (because we must). We can try new treatments. We can respond with hope when we are disappointed, when things don't work. We can choose to take one day at a time rather than catastrophize about the future. We can choose to ask for help rather than go it alone, though this is often the hardest choice of all.

My doctor maintains that as a whole, people approach chronic pain in one of two ways, either they compartmentalize, or they take it on as a gestalt experience. He believes that the compartmentalizers do better in the short run, because they choose to separate, and have more success in separating their pain from their identity, self-esteem, happiness, and productivity. According to my doctor, it is easier for these individuals to see their suffering as just one part of their life, but a part that doesn't render the rest of life irrelevant. I suspect these individuals can be more pragmatic as well about getting out there, taking one day at a time, trying new options, even maintaining hope. Frankl writes about the essential essence of hope, that hope helps people survive, and without it many people, even healthy people, flounder. In my recent experience with chronic pain I had to learn to compartmentalize enough to preserve hope.

On the other hand there are the "gestalt experience" people, people who experience pain as a more consuming reality of their life, perhaps tied to their ideas about self-worth, productivity, happiness. For these people, pain overruns all facets of their lives, often leading to more depression and hopelessness, and sometimes more pain. Although my doctor does not agree with me, I think that the gestalt people might have an advantage in the long run. I suspect that the gestalt people are ruminators, and as long as they get help and have a place to process their thoughts and feelings (instead of suffering alone), they may ultimately be more successful at integrating chronic pain into their lives (choosing to get help being the operative concept here). Most of us, no matter who we are, operate on both levels at one time and another.

Another way to embrace the story of chronic pain is to tell the truth so that we can get help instead of hiding our wounds in silent fear and isolation. Most of us worry that if we talk about chronic pain and the challenges that come with it, other people will think we are complaining, making it up, or looking for attention. At times this is true, but it is the problem of people who don't understand. If you are in chronic pain, don't accept this definition. Chronic pain is not hypochondria (delusions of ill health).

There are people who live and work in constant pain. They don't always look hurt. They don't always act hurt. Yet sometimes they do, and other people still won't acknowledge it. We can't wait for someone else to affirm our physical pain, although it helps. I don't advocate hiding chronic pain, or working through the pain. It is not a little pulled muscle that is going to heal up. People with chronic pain need help. We must personally acknowledge long term physical pain so we can ask for help and decide who can help us.

With chronic pain the smallest details of life come down to pressing questions of autonomy and dignity. The emotional and mental restructuring that comes with chronic pain is profound and intense. Normal activities like opening the door to the bank, taking a shower, or making a meal can become a gauntlet. In an addition, the longer a person experiences chronic pain, the more he or she will struggle with depression. I have never met a person with chronic pain who did not experience some level of depression. This is not a sign of failure. This is a normal human response to overwhelming suffering.

Chronic pain has a cumulative affect. What can be withstood for a week can become unbearable in three months. Over time chronic pain sucks the energy from every other avenue of life. Chronic pain is a marathon. Chronic pain cannot be fully understood until you have had some yourself, although I am not wishing that on anyone here. I am only wishing that we could all have more compassion and patience for the people in our lives with pain. It is a profoundly personal experience, and an intensely private battle.

As one member here, who has a history of chronic pain, said to me "Chronic pain will take you places you didn't think you could go." This statement fascinated me, and I never followed up on it as much as I meant to, but I took it to mean that chronic pain can lead to shocking, even distressing or destructive thoughts and feelings. When I was researching my sermon on generativity a few weeks ago, and reading up on Freud's system of personality; id, ego, and superego, I was interested to read that the function of the id, which houses all human energy, is to relieve tension and pain. The id could easily collapse or explode under the inability to resolve chronic pain.

If, as Freud says, the id houses all energy, a person with chronic pain could easily stop wanting to get out of bed. Or as we have recently seen with Rush Limbaugh, a person in chronic pain can easily form an addiction, certainly to painkillers, but also to anything that provides a distraction like gambling or shopping. What begins as a physical battle ultimately becomes an emotional and mental battle as well. It is a physical, mental, emotional, spiritual whole body experience.

My doctor believes that pain is subjective and real. So pain varies, but is real for the person experiencing it. Not always an easy thing to accept, understand, or treat. Yet something we must understand is that the moment when we acknowledge that another person has chronic pain, that we honor this pain, we have initiated a moment of emotional and mental healing.

For me this first happened when two different doctors and members of this congregation looked me in the face, from one human being to another, and said that I seemed to be in pain. Another moment was when I first met my doctor. He was asking questions, taking down my history. When he looked up he saw that I was crying and he asked, "Why are you crying?" I didn't even know then why I was crying. Only later did I realize I was crying because someone was actually listening to me.

In cases of chronic pain, someone needs to believe us, affirm our experiences, even if it is not possible to understand or completely diagnose them. So often we want to "fix" things for someone in pain, offer ideas and suggestions. But the most important thing we can do for someone with chronic pain is to listen to them, to ask "What is this like for you?" and actually pay attention to the answer, or to ask, "How can I help you?"

It is a humbling experience to witness the body heal. I know it sounds naive, but I have been surprised to discover that the body heals much differently from how it was injured. The human body stores silent and unknown truths that can't be pushed, altered, or compromised. The human body is an intricate, closed system. One small part affects others, and the disruption can rebound back. The human body has logic, but much of it is still unknown, no matter which specialist you see. We must listen and submit to this individual wisdom. We must live with this mystery, strength, weakness, this humanity, even when this means that some people with chronic pain can heal, and others cannot

heal, or cannot heal as well. I do not understand why, but I accept that chronic pain is an ineradicable part of human life.

Suffering is normal, profoundly normal. Chronic pain comes without an invitation, without warning, and we must change. We may be constrained, but we still have the power and freedom to choose how to respond, what to believe, to advocate for our help and health, to listen to people in pain. In our suffering we have dignity and meaning.

May we discover the ability to feel the pain of others

Work for others

Among others

And there come to feel a part

Of that to which we belong

(Congregation Beth Adam, *Beyond the Silence*)