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## Carrying the Pain: The Journey from Suffering to Transformation—Perspectives from Shakespearean Tragedy and Pastoral Care

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**Abstract** This paper proposes an admittedly difficult thesis that emotional pain and suffering can be good news. Rather than denying and running from emotional pain and suffering, we suggest embracing and carrying the pain. Through academic and spiritual writings, an observation of Hamlet’s tragic suffering, an examination of pastoral care case study data, and a B.L.E.S.S. acronym, this paper proposes that within the experience of suffering lies the transformative potential for meaning and fullness.

**Keywords** Pain · Suffering · Transformation · Prince Hamlet · B.L.E.S.S. acronym

### Introduction

“I’m in some emotional pain here,” she confided, in a heart-to-heart conversation.

“The pain will get you where you need to be,” the other replied, well versed in hearing her friend’s pain.

“I was hoping for a little more than a truism,” said the first, as they exchanged knowing nods and smiles.

We are two women connected by professional, educational, and religious values that allow for an effortless exchange about life’s disquietudes. One, an English professor, is familiar with the transformational role that emotional pain and suffering play in Shakespeare’s tragic heroes. The other, a former parish nurse, now nursing professor, is familiar with the private response to pain and suffering. This conversation represents the honesty of our twenty-year friendship; we have learned “Pain *does* get us where we need to be.” This simple exchange also unceremoniously launched an academic inquiry in the humanities

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and in health care where we found confirmation of the transformational power of pain and suffering.

Writing about this topic must be approached respectfully. We state our parameters and our thesis deliberately. First, we are dealing with emotional rather than physical pain and suffering.<sup>1</sup> Second, we use the terms *pain* and *suffering* interchangeably, sometimes together, sometimes separately. Third, we have come to realize that pain and suffering are acceptable, perhaps even good news. This thesis is not an easy one. We have observed in our private lives and academic disciplines that pain and suffering are undeniable, perhaps unexplainable, and definitely undesired components of the human condition, the human predicament. We have also observed this spiritual reality in Christianity<sup>2</sup> and Buddhism.<sup>3</sup>

We all suffer in some way, at some time. Why? That question we cannot answer. We can, though, answer “What lessons can we learn from our suffering? What process, what tools can we use in going through emotional pain?” Not to learn from suffering, not to find tools for dealing with it, for us, would mean going round and round the same painful mountain. Instead of denying or burying or backing away, why not walk toward, walk through the emotional pain and suffering? We embarked on this writing journey to explore that thesis. Now, after two decades, everything we have learned and read encourages us to embrace, to carry the pain and suffering with an awareness that a gift awaits us—the potential for, the promise of, transformation. And knowing that piece of information, experiencing that peace of mind is good news.

## Literature Review

This literature review, while not exhaustive, reflects academic and spiritual perspectives on pain, suffering, and transformation. The academic foci are the humanities and health care. Christianity is the dominant lens for the spiritual writings.

Suffering is universal. Although its form and duration are varied, no one is immune. Medicine, nursing, sociology, psychology, and theology all provide approaches for management. Whether the precursor is physical pain or social distress, suffering is an individualized, subjective, and complex experience involving an intensely negative meaning for an event or a perceived threat (Rodgers and Cowles 1997). Yet, suffering is neither a reimbursable diagnosis nor a fundable research topic because it is considered normal (Morse 2003).

Despite its universal and normal nature, suffering calls forth a need for appropriate responses from family, friends, and rituals through which suffering may be eased. We ache seeing our loved ones suffer yet grow weary with protracted suffering and may even question its validity. This dilemma creates “double suffering,” i.e., being denied one’s suffering by family, friends, caregivers, even oneself, but still suffering (Arman and Rehnfeldt 2006). Social isolation may result as the sufferer fears and perceives social degradation and alienation, thus inhibiting motivation to “take action” (Barrett 1999,

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this paper, we choose to limit our inquiry to emotional pain and suffering. This is not to say that emotional pain is disassociated from physical pain; nor does it suggest that what we learned about emotional pain is inapplicable to physical pain. We simply do not draw conclusions about physical pain in this paper. Our thesis contends that we must embrace the emotional pain and suffering associated with the normative, universal human condition, e.g., loss, disappointment, confusion, uncertainty, and transitions.

<sup>2</sup> Christianity: “...In the world ye shall have tribulation...” (John 16:33 King James Version).

<sup>3</sup> Buddhism: “The third mark of existence is suffering...” Chodron. *Comfortable with Uncertainty*, p. 53.

p. 464), to reverse the pattern of suffering (Cassell 2004). This social isolation provides an opportunity to journey within and discover ourselves more deeply and more fully (Barrett 1999). Sometimes there is no other place to go.

Among sufferers, a simultaneous longing to talk and an uncertainty regarding how much to divulge occurs. People “only open up or awaken as much suffering as they want to or can cope with” (Arman and Rehnsfeldt 2006, p. 239). This awakening becomes a turning point. A paradox emerges—“awakening suffering can be synonymous with alleviating it” (Arman and Rehnsfeldt 2006, p. 240). As French novelist Marcel Proust claimed, “We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full” (Harvey 2000, p. 1).

Awakening occurs through an attentive, caring, and perhaps confrontational encounter from which a personal meaning of suffering develops (Rehnsfeldt and Eriksson 2004). Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor Frankl (1963) believed that in suffering, one could find meaning for living. The stark suffering he endured in concentration camps involved loss of personal control and autonomy, yet he emerged with undeniable enlightenment. Despite one’s finding meaning, often times, the suffering continues. Truly, for some, it never comes to an end (Cassell 2004; Frank 2001). We carry the pain and the acceptance of suffering as a path toward meaning in life.

The potential for meaning and fullness are planted within each experience of suffering. The fullness of this experience is multifactorial, i.e., suffering is variable; extends beyond pain as the sole etiology; permeates physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions; is temporal; creates powerlessness and alienation; and holds the promise of transformation (Barrett 1999). This potential does not exact a patriarchal view of suffering or a Western ideal of stoicism (Georges 2002); rather our paper acknowledges the transformative promise inherent in the experience of suffering. We reframe the negative connotation associated with suffering.

In addition to the academic transformational perspective on pain and suffering, spiritual writers underscore the positive aspect. Catholic theologian Nouwen (1979) advocates integrating rather than isolating suffering. If isolated from the whole of one’s life, suffering becomes meaningless. This concept brings us back to Frankl’s (1963) example of finding meaning in suffering. Nouwen recognizes that wrestling with pain leads to a deeper relationship to God and an increased understanding of self. In this inner wrestling, educator/author/activist Palmer (1993, p. x) advocates that the pain compels us to examine deeply our condition and “to consider sources of insight that may have seemed uncouth when we and our world were humming with power and success.” Spiritual truths can offer this insight and hope. Palmer (1993, p. x) reminds us that “beneath the broken surface of our lives there remains—in the words of Thomas Merton—‘a hidden wholeness.’”

Another source of insight includes the challenge to be comfortable with uncertainty advocated by Chodron (2003), an American Buddhist nun and a student of Tibetan meditation. She points out that “When things fall apart and we’re on the verge of we know not what, the test for each of us is to stay on that brink” (2000, p. 9). Citing the first noble truth of Buddhism, i.e., “suffering is inevitable for human beings as long as we believe things last” (2000, p. 9), Chodron (2000) says that rather than panic, we need to be open to the impermanence that results from our ordeals of pain and suffering.

John S. Dunne, former John A. O’Brien Chair in Theology at the University of Notre Dame, agrees. He addresses the “essential ordeal of a journey with God” especially when we encounter “something we didn’t think God would allow” (1993, p. 9). Citing The Venerable Cardinal John Henry Newman and English storyteller and professor J.R.R. Tolkien, Dunne offers that in this ordeal we can bring our divided heart to God to be

“guided and guarded” (1993, p. 10). We can be guarded from a darkening, guided into wisdom with God as our companion (Dunne 1993, pp. 9–10).

### Perspectives from Shakespearean Tragedy and Pastoral Care

Then, we saw this subject—of transformation amid pain and suffering—was inherent in our respective disciplines of humanities and health care. In our academic fields, we came upon Shakespearean characters and pastoral caregivers who hung with emotional pain and suffering, wrestled with it—and let the struggle change and transform them. From this shared confirmation within our disciplines, we discovered stark and nuanced elements and teachings about suffering in Shakespearean tragedy (*Hamlet*) and in the parish nurse’s collaboration with pastoral care.

We again confirmed that we cannot avoid emotional pain, but we can make choices about how we respond. The same is true in literature. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, the hero experiences unexpected suffering and calamity. While outward conflict is obvious, the “inward struggle is most emphasized” (Bradley 1991, p. 34).

This is what happened to Hamlet. Shakespeare’s (1974) young Danish prince questions, denies, and delays when faced with the death of his father and his mother’s marriage to his uncle who has murdered his father. For three acts, Hamlet ponders what is “rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.iv.89) and his own world, like an “unweeded garden..., rank and gross” (I.ii.135–136). He struggles with the loss of his carefree youth and his secure home; he must now respond to a changed and shattered life.

In Act IV, he is sent to England where he will face death by order of his uncle. His situation is at crisis point; he can no longer procrastinate. Hamlet acts, finally. He changes the death orders, jumps ship, and climbs aboard another which delivers him home to Denmark.

This scene takes place offstage. A bit farfetched, Hamlet’s action is necessary for the plot. But also, from our academic perspectives, we focus on and understand the requisite internal process that precedes substantial outer change. Hamlet does too. He struggles for three acts with disappointment, betrayal, confusion, and hurt, but in Act IV, something happens within this young prince, and he takes action. Rather than deny or run from the emotional pain, he confronts the situation with an action plan.

And when he comes through that crisis, he is changed, transformed. We see him in Act V—decisive, sensitive, able to forgive, able to see the big picture. Rather than a confused, frenetic Hamlet, this prince is now self-assured, empowered, and no longer dressed in black. Although he dies at the end, he understands his world; he accepts his place. He is insightful about human nature and is at peace. The inward suffering has transformed him. We may not know why or how, but going through the suffering has an effect on this young prince, and by extension on the viewer. The play is a tragedy; we are sad but not dejected. The soul-trying times Hamlet endures—although unwanted intrusions—work for good. It is a mystery yet undeniable.

Franciscan Father Rohr (2004) addresses this mystery of pain transforming us. Rohr teaches in those “crossroad moments,” we must hold the pain—in what he calls a “liminal space.” *Limen* is Latin for *threshold* (limen, n.d.). This space is the “crucial in between time when everything actually happens and yet nothing appears to be happening...the waiting time...when the real transformation takes place” (Rohr 2004).

Hamlet’s “liminal space” takes place offstage. He shares what happens with his best friend Horatio. Carrying, holding emotional pain is private, rarely played out in public,

often experienced in solitary, dark times and shared only with people we trust. Shakespeare got it right. He speaks to us today about emotional suffering with a play written in 1601. This is Shakespeare's genius and his confirmation of the universal human condition.<sup>4</sup>

Similar to Shakespearean tragedy, the health care profession has poignant portrayals of transformation amid suffering. This poignancy is evident within the specialty role of the parish nurse, a role that integrates faith and health (Westberg 2006). The parish nurse "walks with" the client in his/her faith and health journey in a manner which is less about "doing for" and more about "being with." An awareness of the stark reality that suffering remains beyond one's control opens the door for a presence of vulnerability, i.e., the "vulnerability of the shared human condition" (Fowler 2008, p. 213). In this awareness, both nurse and client are open to transformation—a hallmark of the spiritual journey of pain and suffering.

This nurse author practiced 7 years as a parish nurse collaborating with pastors in the delivery of spiritual care to parishioners (Blanchfield and McLaughlin 2006). Pastoral caregivers (clergy) acknowledge the presence of suffering, yet hesitancy remains to name it outright and promote a proactive stance on confronting, accepting, and surrendering to it. Clergy are, however, well versed in the transformative potential of suffering found within scripture, within theology, and within their personal journeys.

To obtain insight into the pastoral perspective of suffering, the authors conducted two informal case studies consisting of three interviews per participant. Our participants, Hans and Sharon (pseudonyms), have a combined 70 years of chaplain and pulpit experience. They were chosen for their years of helping others through emotional pain and suffering. The contexts in which they have delivered professional care range from the pulpit to the classroom to the battlefield.

We were interested in seeing if our participants' professional experiences confirmed what we had learned about pain and suffering through our literature review and our reading of Shakespeare. The interview questions were directed toward their perspectives on pain and suffering within the life journey and in transformation. Both Hans and Sharon consented to our interpretation of their audiotaped responses. The following excerpts (edited slightly for readability) highlight themes extracted from the interviews.

A consistent theme throughout Hans' interview was his perception of suffering as *carrying the pain* combined with a pragmatic view of *cashing in on the pain*:

I think suffering is the journey of carrying the pain and the business of trying to make it into something worthwhile, a payoff eventually—the spiritualizing of it. In any case, it would be very difficult for me to carry pain for pain's sake. It's a very real thing to go for a month and not see the sunrise when you are suffering, and it's a very hard thing to have a life of suffering. And we try with spiritual tools like Psalms and special readings and communion and touching and things like that, but still it's there, that internal journey of carrying the pain, carrying the suffering.

<sup>4</sup> Of Shakespeare's four main tragic heroes, Hamlet embraces his emotional pain and suffering. Macbeth caves in, folds under his pain, and life becomes "a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing" (V.v.26–28). Othello, in denial at first, acknowledges, too late, that in killing Desdemona, he "lov'd not wisely but...Perplexed in the extreme;...threw a pearl away" (V.ii.344–347). Lear, unable to step outside his own perspective, cannot reconcile with his daughters. His bitter renunciation of the universe is evident at the death of Cordelia—"Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life./And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more./Never, never, never, never" (V.iii.307–309). More could be said about these heroes, but—to be brief—Hamlet gets it right. He embraces his pain and suffering and is transformed by Act V.

Hans moves from *carrying the pain* to the practical application of *cashing in on the pain*:

I have to make it worthwhile. If I was going to drive 100 miles, it's got to be worth something. If I'm going to cut the lawn, rake the lawn, shovel snow, it's got to be worth something. Otherwise I'm not going to do it. In my profession I help people dig a deeper well of strength that goes beyond the cancer, for example, into the spiritual realm of finding that there could still be meaning at this time. That is the journey of pain. It really has to be transformed spiritually. That's the only thing that we can do. We talk about attitudes and all that, but if it doesn't have a spiritual well underneath it, the water will be stale or stagnant.

Despite Han's belief about the universal nature of suffering—the “human predicament factor” as he calls it—and the transformative potential of pain, he was clear that this topic is not pulpit-friendly news:

It is not good news to tell somebody that they are going to suffer. That's not good news. And it takes a lot of spiritual development to say you will find satisfaction in carrying this suffering and experiencing God that way. We do not want darkness.

In contrast, Sharon viewed her experiences as a conduit for sharing during her chaplaincy visits. She focuses on pain and suffering as molding and shaping her:

We use the word ‘*suffer*’ in the English language to mean ‘*to allow*.’ And I see that in taking that definition of suffering, I've allowed myself to be shaped by whatever external or internal or physical pain I've had. I guess my suffering is how I've been molded and shaped, and still there is ongoing suffering. That's suffering changing. You know the old, maybe you aren't old enough, but those old kaleidoscopes, that you look through. That's how I feel my life is sometimes. Each day is a different twist.

Sharon sees pain and suffering as her teacher:

Pain and suffering have dug my faith deeper, almost like digging a trench. I see this person (me) building, ripening, maturing. God isn't finished with me yet. God is teaching me how to die, for example, when I see people die. How I deal with pain is the suffering part of it. Not just pain for pain's sake, never. Even though I did not like my experiences with pain, I was able to integrate them into my teaching aspect. I don't see God as a mechanical God—I'm going to give you this and you this. That's why I can feel like I'm walking with a great teacher who will teach me all the way—even if I don't like all the assignments or exams.

Like Hans, Sharon identified the axiom of never *pain for pain's sake*. Seeing her various life transitions as a key opened her to transformation, not necessarily a key she wanted at the time but a key essential to her *training*:

In itself, transition is painful and sometimes people don't want to change. So let's say losing a job is quite devastating and painful. Nobody wants that pain, but they turn it around and use it as a key to open a door to the room, another, possibly, better situation—that's how I see it. Lots of time I was pulled kicking and screaming to the next transition. Maybe I felt like it was more a wall than a door, but after I got through it, then I thought, ‘Oh that was a door.’ Hindsight recognizes it was a door that opened. As I've gotten older, I don't look at it as magic, but I look at it like, ‘Well, it worked last time, so now it's like I'm looking for doors.’ The whole idea of transformation—we just can't understand it on this side.

Sharon advocates educating oneself about the value of pain:

I do a lot of reading and without that, I probably wouldn't have enough education or background to consider how pain can help. This is a 'You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free' kind of thing. If I know things, I can open the door. Allow it in. I can understand people who say 'Why me?' but somehow I've never had to say 'Why.' It's all a part of the training.

### A Tool for the Journey

These two seasoned clergy would have had good advice for young Hamlet: let pain be your teacher; cash in on that pain. Hamlet would nod; he learned these lessons. We are like Hamlet—all students in this universal classroom. We can learn from suffering; we will be transformed when we embrace the learning curve. Our growing edge surfaces with continued awareness of the following five “painful truths.” We offer this acronym that suggests our pain may ultimately **B.L.E.S.S.** us.

**B**eware of personal expectations of others when navigating life's rocky places. Realize that human beings, by nature, have limits and cannot meet all our needs. Help may come from unexpected sources while familiar sources may disappoint. Others may not validate or be patient enough to hear our pain. This impatience is less judgment on them and more wake-up call for us. Determine expectations, learn what to accept, and move on to the second painful truth.

**L**isten to the inner voice. Aspects of this sacred journey will be, of necessity, solitary. Healing answers come from within. While social support is recognized as a buffer for stress that mitigates health outcomes (Cohen 2004), medication, therapy, support groups, and casseroles from neighbors have limitations. Recognition of the solitary journey releases others from curing us (Schwiebert and DeKlyen 2007). Listening prepares us for the third painful truth.

**E**mbrace pain. This directive is radical for a society that revolves around avoiding and ameliorating emotional pain. The way to get to the other side of pain is through it. Allow the process to unfold; get unhooked from speedy understandings and convenient outcomes. Embrace rather than deny the loss, sadness, disappointment, or anger. Embrace rather than oppose the changes. Embracing does not indicate approval; changes we do not want will occur. Live in the present. And now for the fourth “painful truth.”

**S**piritual components, present in all situations, free us from worldly parameters, trap-pings, and expectations. Spiritual traditions introduce a transcendent realm and guide us to graceful transitions. Simple admonitions come to mind—gaze at God and glance at the details; make peace with the process and have faith in the outcome; let go and let God; hire your Higher Power.

**S**ame old, same old, here we go again. Did we really think we were complete and fully self-actualized? Think again. Opportunities to practice lessons learned will come, regardless of the “grade” we achieved the last time around. Pain can come from unexpected sources and catch us off guard. Surrender to the process. Let the hits keep coming—blessings will follow.

### Conclusion

What can we conclude about emotional pain and suffering? That it is acceptable and even good news. Making this shift in thinking means embracing and trusting suffering. Spiritual writer Warren-Severson (2008, 2009) suggests this very concept:



What if from childhood we were taught and encouraged—in our homes, our extended families, our schools, our churches—to explore life's varied losses in a manner...more about embracing than bracing against...? (p. 27)

What if we trust that the dark nights of our souls are essential to our growth, that spiritual maturity cannot be attained without them? (p. 7)

In this lifelong journey, we will carry emotional pain and suffering. This is a given.

But carrying emotional pain and suffering can lead to transformation. And that is good news.

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