

SUFFERING OVERVIEW

The ideas of suffering and trauma overlap in describing something painful and distressing. The word suffering seems to emphasize the feelings of pain and distress some endure over some time. Trauma emphasizes the intensity of some terrible experience and the consequences that follow. A person may suffer gravely, through physical or emotional illness for instance, without any sudden and horrifying experience and without the flashbacks and/or guilt associated with post-traumatic disorders. All traumas entail some suffering, and most suffering has some traumatic origin.

Suffering can come to those of all ages. It is terribly difficult to observe young children suffering with deadly illness or injury.

Joni Erickson Tada has vividly described to thousands of young listeners what it meant for her, as a vibrant 17-year-old, to find herself paralyzed after diving into the shallow waters of Chesapeake Bay. Her dreams of college and career, romance and sex, travel and freedom suddenly evaporated.

No one else is being punished like this. Why did God do this to me?

In bed for a year, completely dependent on orderlies and nurses...

How much more can I take? I'm at the end of my rope!

The bedsores, stitches, bone surgery... and I'm still surrounded by canvas, catheter tube, and urine bags.... I'm trapped in this gloomy hospital where we sit like zombies waiting to die.... I'm trapped! Stryker frame, straps, and Crutchfield tongs... and God doesn't care.... He doesn't even care. (*Joni*, Zondervan, 1976: 79-80).

Joni is still paralyzed and still suffers. But she has learned to paint, to write (her story above for instance), to speak to great audiences, to comfort, encourage and inspire others. And she is married. She has found comfort from and peace with God, and tells others of His love and care.

My class and I recently watched a video, "Understanding Violence," produced by the Mass Suffolk County District Attorney's Office. In it Roberto Rivera explains how he was shot in the back and the many surgeries and indignities necessary to save his life. I often wonder about the many young men like him who find themselves trapped in a wheel chair for the rest of their lives. Roberto is a former gang member who spends his time speaking to other young people about

choices that can save their own and other's lives. He's come to believe that his life, and even his suffering, has a purpose.

Suffering may be the result of rejection, bullying or abuse. It can be the result of painful losses. It may sneak up on someone due to a chemical imbalance, mental or terminal illness.

Some physical injuries are so deep they must not be quickly closed and covered; they must heal from the inside out. It takes time to heal from both deep physical and emotional wounds.

In most cases suffering, at some point, needs to be talked about. It takes trusted and sensitive listeners to help such healing—just as it takes good doctors to deal with serious injuries.

Suffering is an awesome thing. Over the past few months, my wife and I watched a friend of many years die—at only forty years of age. Her life had other suffering: a husband leaving her, loss of friends, and finally criticisms from those who condemned her lack of faith when prayers for healing the cancer seemed to fail. We were thankful for our visits with her. Mostly I sat quietly, she didn't like noise, and then prayed with her. She would lovingly hold our hands, feebly but firmly. My wife was able to chat with her and get her to laugh, and then ask what personal things she could buy for her that week. Another friend was able to discuss her anger toward God and fear of dying. Their conversations led to reflections on the book of Job and the blooming desert in Isaiah. Through these she found spiritual peace and acceptance of dying. Her sister, with whom she had not always been close, came to be with her those final weeks and their relationship found new depths. We four were among many who visited her. Each brought some contribution to a sufferer, and received blessings in return.

We cannot know life without suffering; it is part of the way things are. Some say suffering is essential to growth and a fruitful life. We must learn to handle it when it comes our way or overcomes those we love.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How have you known suffering?
2. What are the differences when you are the sufferer and when someone else is suffering?
3. Is it difficult to discuss suffering? When and how might this be done? What might be the benefits?

4. What can sufferers teach us that we cannot teach ourselves?
5. What is the biggest problem about suffering?
6. What stories or points from the article above might help such discussions?
7. What do you think should be the goals of discussions about suffering?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Suffering is part of the fabric of life as we know it. It can lead to bitterness and despair or to resolution, courage and hope.
2. It takes thoughtfulness, sensitivity and even some skill to respond appropriately to those who are in great suffering. This topic is meant to be a step in that direction.
3. In this life, death has always been seen as the final suffering. It is said that if we are not ready to die, we are not fully ready to live.

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