

## CHAPTER 1

# Suffering

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A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
She refused to be consoled because they are no more.

Matt. 2:18 (NRSV)

Raquel did not know how she ended up at the creek.<sup>1</sup> It was the place she always went to be alone and to think. Today, there was no thinking, only raw, animal pain, and sounds coming from her throat and belly that she did not recognize as her own. Memory fragments pushed their way into her consciousness, and then dissolved again like the foam swirling around the rocks in the water: the phone shrilling in their bedroom at dawn, her husband Carlos's ashen face and then his eyes, rolling upward as if he were longing to escape his body, and his broken voice telling her "There's been an accident. David is dead." Their beautiful son David broken, dead – no, that word cannot have anything to do with David! – the words "terrible accident," "T-boned," "totaled," "the other guy ran a light," a stranger coming off his night shift, racked with remorse, the police, "I'm so sorry ma'am," hospital, blood, a pale green sheet over David's-not-David's face, an undertaker. There were the terrible places they had to go, people to talk to, a sense of incomprehensible urgency, impossible things to see and do. There was the feeling of icy numbness, an emotional and mental hypothermia – hearing, but not comprehending – refusing to comprehend. Then came the stumbling out of the house, across the yard and half-running, half-sliding down the bank, branches whipping her arms and legs. The falling to her knees, here, on the rocks at the edge of the water, keening: Where is David? What are they doing with David?

Suffering is the starting point for all pastoral and practical theology – in Jürgen Moltmann's words, "the open wound of life in this world" (1993: 49). My method, in

<sup>1</sup>Fictional vignette. Thanks to Carrie Doehring, Mark Douglas, and John Hoffmeyer for feedback on this essay.

common with most practical theologians', is inductive, beginning with experience, rather than deductive, deriving propositions from abstract theories of human nature (either philosophical or psychological) or from doctrines of God, evil, and salvation. Therefore, the steps that I will take begin with the concreteness of human experience: (1) What is happening here? What is suffering? How do we make meaning of such pain (using both social-scientific and theological perspectives)? (2) Deepening our theological reflection, what are the theological problems raised by suffering? What might be understood in the presence of this suffering person about the nature of suffering and its relationship both to the problem of evil and to what we can discern about God's activity in the midst of suffering? As Christian theologians, (where) do we find an answering cry of hope and redemption to the groans of suffering? (3) Turning more explicitly to praxis, what healing and liberative responses might grow out of these reflections? How might hope and redemption, love and justice, be conceived in this situation?

Binary divisions between Christian tradition and human experience, or theology and practice, are false dichotomies. Theology and the lived situation cannot be pulled apart, except as an exercise of abstract thought. The aim of practical theology is not speculation, but liberative praxis. Practical theology is not merely the application of systematic theologians' abstract conceptions through a refinement of pastoral skills. I would also argue that it is more than "critical theological reflection upon practices of the Church as they interact with practices of the world" (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 5). Practical theology is a constructive theology in its own right, in which all categories of scriptural exegesis and doctrinal formulation are open for ongoing consideration and critique. As a feminist theologian, moreover, I embrace the idea, along with other feminist/womanist/*mujerista*, liberation, and postcolonial theologians, that human experience is an authoritative source for theology (e.g., Gutierrez 1987; Cone 1997; Lartey 2003; Isasi-Díaz 2004). For criteria, I assume that "good" theology must inform and be informed by both healing and liberation, and therefore must be relevant to and ultimately grounded in Christian practices of community (e.g., Lartey 2003). Guided also by my Anglican identity and formation, I take scripture, tradition, *and* reason and experience as valid sources for theological reflection – but as a practical theologian I begin with experience, then scripture and tradition interpreted by reason, for both ongoing theological reflection and the creative shaping of personal and communal responses to suffering.

## What Is Suffering?

The English word *suffer* defines itself by onomatopoeia: the *s* a wincing intake of breath followed by a sibilant sound of pain, squeezed through the teeth . . . the *uh* – not the "ah" of pleasure but the truncated moan/grunt/groan of an ache or a kick in the stomach . . . the *fff* of surprise that the pain goes on, deflation in the face of its continuation . . . the *er* a sound of depletion, running out of air, of life, of hope. *Suffering* is sometimes listed as a dictionary synonym for other words: pain, anguish, distress, misery, agony, torment, affliction, and it belongs to that family of words which signal

a deep wound or dis-ease. But *suffering*, to suffer, conveys something the other terms do not – an ongoingness and a bearing-with entwined with the passage of time or the subjective experience of time slowing down as *s-uh-ff-er-ing* swallows the hope of a speedy end to pain. Its ongoingness is revealed in the popular wisdom after someone has experienced a quick death: “Well, it’s a blessing that she didn’t suffer.”

In addition to its ongoingness, *suffering* conveys a level of symbolization, of expressiveness, that pain does not. Pain may be mental, physical, or emotional, but the word *pain* itself merely denotes a phenomenon. Pain simply is. It can be described (“acute” or “chronic,” “here” but “not there”) or even measured (“6 on a scale of 1 to 10”), but it does not convey any meaning in and of itself. Some pain is even necessary to survival – for example, the burning sensation that causes us to take our hand off a hot stove. But pain is registered at the most primal level of brain function, and does not register in the thinking part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) before we have already yanked our hand away from the source of the burning.

*Suffering* is the *meaning that we make, or attempt to make, of our pain* (Cassell 1991; Sulmasy 1999). Indeed, suffering requires consciousness, and with consciousness, symbolization and a rendering of pain into some meaningful articulation – a word, a cry, a narrative, even a pleading look into the eyes of another. For healing to take place fully, we must make meaning in relation to our pain, incorporating our values, spiritual beliefs, hopes, fears, anger, sorrow, and a narrative sense of what has happened, is happening, and is going to happen. So pain – especially pain that exceeds transient physical pain – must actually be transformed *into* suffering for holistic healing of mind, body, and spirit to occur. And for pain to be transformed into suffering, there must be communication of that pain to another living being. Pain is mute, but *suffering speaks*.

While Raquel experiences the normal shock, numbness, and confusion of acute grief, she is not cut off from expressing her pain. As we imagine the sharpness of the rocks under her knees, hear her deep wailing, and share her memories and images, we receive and recognize her suffering. We can connect it to our own memories and narratives of suffering and our hearts go out to her. This is pain that is told, and in the telling draws us into an intersubjective relationship with her sorrow and our own. As the intersubjective sharing of pain, suffering actively elicits recognition. In fact, it is when recognition is withheld or refused by another that suffering collapses back into unarticulated pain.

Certain forms of pain by their very nature remain encapsulated, unsymbolized, and unexpressed. When pain is too overwhelming, threatening, or incomprehensible, it is dissociated rather than fully experienced and expressed. This is the definition of *trauma* – not simply any injury, but one that threatens physical or psychic annihilation – akin to what theologian Wendy Farley (1990) calls “radical suffering,” which cries out for justice even if healing is impossible. Traumatic experience is walled off, broken into its different aspects (e.g., bodily sensation, emotion, and thought), without normal narrative links to make sense of what happened. Traumatic experience is therefore “unformulated” (Stern 2009), inexpressible, and therefore unrecognized by another.

It is precisely this absence of recognition that *prevents* pain from becoming suffering – as when an abuser who “loves” the child becomes the unseeing, unempathic monster who uses, beats, or rapes him; or when there is a collective shock such as the attack on

the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, or the massive earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, and the normal “holding” function of society temporarily breaks down. There is a rupture in the capacity to know. When our pain, particularly intense pain, is not received and understood by an empathic other, the body-mind reacts to trauma through the mental process of dissociation, in which knowledge is kept out of awareness as an unconscious defense against the terror of being totally overwhelmed or annihilated. Nonverbal enactment then becomes the only mode by which this unformulated experience can communicate.

Enactment, in the words of relational psychoanalyst Donnel Stern, is “the interpersonalization of a dissociation” (2009: 86). The lack of symbolization and conscious articulation prevents suffering (the expression of pain and its associated meaning) and hence healing of the original wound. As dissociative processes outlive their usefulness and create new problems, they set in motion new forms of suffering, which *can* be understood as suffering, but as *incomprehensible* suffering that never seems amenable to healing, unmoored from any obvious cause. So an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse does not understand why she cannot seem to sustain a meaningful relationship; a war veteran cannot understand why the long-anticipated homecoming is not a source of joy; survivors of a natural disaster cannot understand why they can’t seem to settle back into a routine years later; Raquel cannot understand how the loss of her son is wreaking havoc in her family. Dissociation creates new suffering because it is disconnected from its traumatic origins and remains incomprehensible and unhealed.

When suffering is fully connected to the original source of unbearable pain, it is tragic but *comprehensible*. It may be expressed best by this paradox: *nondissociated suffering is to bear the unbearable*. Because suffering is the expression of pain that leads to meaning-making, it allows us to bear up under unbearable pain without negating or denying the reality that we are doing so. Through symbolization, reaching out, and retelling, pain becomes more bearable because, as new meanings are constructed in relationship, the burden is shared and God’s compassionate presence is experienced. This can connect individual experience to the larger social context in which suffering occurs, and to action for justice and change.

## Theological Dilemmas: The Problem of Theodicy

The very existence of pain and suffering raises particular challenges for theology in its search for meaning.<sup>2</sup> Why must we suffer at all? Is suffering ever redemptive? Two tropes have been especially problematic: first, the logical or philosophical contradiction between the belief in a good and all-powerful God and the existence of evil as the cause of all suffering; and secondly, especially for Christians, the ethical question raised by the crucifixion and by theologies of atonement in which suffering is framed as salvific.

<sup>2</sup>Thanks to my students in “Pastoral Theology of Good and Evil” at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and at Columbia Theological Seminary for stimulating discussions on theodicy.

There is a logical contradiction, laid out historically in philosophy and theology, between three mutually incompatible axioms: divine goodness, divine omnipotence/sovereignty, and the existence of suffering/evil. The eighteenth-century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz used the term *theodicy* – literally, the justification of God (*theós*, God + *dike*, justice) – to describe efforts to grapple with this problem. But the question is as ancient as humanity itself, and appears in the Bible most poignantly in the Book of Job. Any attempt to resolve this triangle must resort either to weakening one of the three points (usually by strengthening another point) or to leaving the contradictions as an ultimate paradox in which logical explanations dissolve into an appeal to mystery.

Early church formulations tended to emphasize the fullness of God's goodness and perfection (following Plato) and to de-emphasize the power of evil. At the turn of the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo framed evil as an absence of good (*privatio boni*) rather than an opposing malicious presence – a tear in the fabric of God's harmonious creation caused by humans' willful turning away from God (Gen. 3). Even earlier, in the second century, Irenaeus of Lyon viewed suffering as a necessary corrective to bring an immature creation to perfection (Hick 2007). In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas further codified Augustine's view, defining evil as the absence, disproportion, or misuse of the good order of the universe ordained by God through natural law. This view has remained foundational for Catholic doctrine.

In the Reformation, theologians turned to the sovereignty of God as the strong point of the triangle. They qualified evil by redefining it as a part of God's ultimate plan, beyond finite human knowledge. Especially for Calvin and later reformed theologians, God's goodness is preserved through confidence in God's providence. Evil becomes a temporary experience of suffering that will ultimately be healed and even forgotten (Volf 2006) in the final redemption of all creation. Twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth described evil as *das Nichtige* (Nothing), which appears to have power but has already been "objectively defeated as such in Jesus Christ" (Zurheide 1997: 35–48). Lutheran theology is similar in its focus on eschatology, but places particular emphasis on the cross as a sign of God's sharing in the suffering of creation (Marty 1983: 59). Luther also emphasized the "hiddenness of God," the unknowable aspect of God in which God uses suffering and even evil for purposes beyond human comprehension (Hummel 2003: 28–34).

In the twentieth century, process theology, derived from philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, took a different logical turn. For process theologians (e.g., Suchocki 1988; Griffin 2004), it is God's omnipotence that is qualified, leaving God's goodness and the reality of suffering and evil undiminished. God refrains from coercive power in order to grant freedom to the creation, while at the same time exercising persuasive and restorative power for transformation toward the greater good. Marjorie Suchocki (1988) emphasizes the relational implications of process theology, with its concept of a cosmos that is fully interdependent.

Today, many theologians question the very premise of theodicy, arguing for a turn from abstract, logical arguments to justify God toward a more complex, practice-oriented approach to evil and suffering (E. Farley 1990; W. Farley 1990; Cooper-White 2003). Some have turned to the tragic in response to evil, emphasizing ambiguity and mystery, hearkening back to Job. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, for example,

argues for an “unsettling reading of an unsettled God” (2000: 71) over against conventional “settled” views that maintain the economic status quo.

Some contemporary theologians argue against theodicy altogether as a “destructive discourse” (Billings 2000; see also Surin 1986; Tilley 1991; Swinton 2006), a misdirected search for answers to *why* evil exists, rather than focusing on *how* it might be confronted and overturned. These theologians advocate for practices, not merely arguments, that resist the social structures in which evil actually inheres (Tilley 1991: 238ff.). This view finds a parallel in liberation theologies in which theology and praxis are intertwined:

Only if we take seriously the suffering of the innocent and live the mystery of the cross amid that suffering, but in the light of Easter, can we prevent our theology from being “windy arguments” (Job 16:3) . . . As such, the question of theodicy remains open and anomalous *rather than answered and (hence) forgotten*. (Billings 2000: 8, citing Gutierrez 1987: 103; emphasis mine)

## The Problem of the Cross and Atonement Theology

A second problematic trope in Christian theology exalts suffering as redemptive, particularly in doctrines of Christ’s passion and crucifixion as atonement for Adam’s fall (Gen. 3:1–24). The cross meets God’s perfect demand for justice by substituting God’s son to pay the ransom owed by humanity for their infection with original sin. This doctrine of substitutionary atonement, articulated most clearly in the late eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury, became the dominant doctrine of atonement adopted by the church by the end of the Middle Ages. It remains a powerful theme in traditional theology and liturgies.

Feminist theologians critique this understanding as a glorification of suffering, even “divine child abuse” (Fortune 1983: 197). They repudiate the idea that suffering for its own sake is ever redemptive. The cross should not be interpreted to sanctify victimization, which reinforces submission to violence by women and other oppressed groups. Rather Jesus’ passion should be understood in liberationist terms as his refusal to back down in the face of oppression and evil, and his willingness to stand for healing, mercy, and justice for the least and the outcasts – even at the penalty of torture and death. From this perspective, God’s own self enters via the incarnation into human suffering, and the cross becomes a symbol of God’s eternal solidarity with all who suffer (Solberg 1997; Thornton 2002).

## Meaning-Making toward Hope and New Life

What then can we discern about God’s activity in the midst of suffering? If suffering is more than sheer pain, but is the meaning made of pain, what alternative redemptive meanings might be brought to bear? A liberationist theology of the cross understands

God's solidarity with human suffering as an expression of God's ultimate receiving of the creature's pain *and* suffering into God's own being. Healing/salvation is the recognition of our cry of suffering, even the incarnate, embodied receiving of our pain *as* God's pain, and through this recognition and receiving, the transformation of our pain into new life. The narrative shape of the paschal mystery, a human-divine journey through torture and death to risen life, gives new meaning to our own terror and anguish, both personally and as oppressed communities. The resurrection becomes a sign of the new life that is possible beyond both pain and suffering (Moltmann 2005), a redemption not only or primarily from sin, stain, or fault, but from all creaturely grief, victimization, and affliction.

## Implications of Suffering for Practical Theology

What healing and liberative responses might grow out of these reflections? What are adequate, appropriate, and empathic Christian responses to suffering? How might hope and redemption, the goods of love and justice, be conceived as possible?

Stern uses the term *witness* to describe the role of the therapist. In relationship "we are called into being by acts of *recognition* by the other" (2009: 110ff.). Drawing on infant observation research, he argues that the mind itself is brought into being by acts of recognition by primary caretakers. When this process is lacking or damaged by abuse, the person's sense of self and experience cannot unfold in an ongoing narrative of self and others. We need a witness for the events of our lives to "fall into a narrative awareness" that is eventually internalized in our minds as our "partners in thought." Without this, there can be no formulation or renewal of experience. Instead, experience is continually interrupted by dissociation and re-enactment of the original trauma.

The practice of witnessing is sacred. By serving as witness to another's suffering – perhaps the first genuinely empathic witness that individual has ever experienced – we may facilitate this process of deep recognition of the other's pain. Furthermore, this process of witnessing, once initiated, can gradually shift from an interpersonal recognition to one that can be internalized by the person in pain. As suffering is truly recognized, new images, symbols, words, narratives, and meanings emerge in the context of a relationship where both partners can truly be seen and known. This process in turn promotes inner transformation – what Stern (2009) has called the "reinstatement of witnessing between states of self" within the self of one who suffers, enabling a renewed and continued productive unfolding – new life!

The appropriation by psychoanalysis of the term *witness* is striking because of its resonance with theological language. The term *witness* in English is the translation of the biblical Greek word *martyrs*, or martyr. I do not want to suggest that as pastoral counselors or practical theologians we sacrifice ourselves in an unhealthy way or lose our healthy boundaries in ministry with survivors of trauma or those who suffer. However, there is an unavoidable cost – a kind of martyrdom or giving of one's self – to the work of witnessing to another's pain. By being willing to be witnesses, we commit ourselves to a costly walking alongside those who suffer.

The good news of the Christian life is that this solidarity need not – and should not, at least exclusively – be practiced alone. As Jesus sent the disciples out two by two, our empathic sensitivity and pastoral imagination are sustained by our sense of being held both by God’s empowering love and by Christian community as the body of Christ.

We are called to solidarity with Raquel, broken with agonizing grief. We are not called to try to rationalize her pain, fix it, or talk it away, but in the words of theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, writing after the death of his son:

If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it’s not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit with me on my mourning bench. (1987: 34)

As the word *patient* comes from *patiens*, or suffering, the very act of empathic witnessing – or recognition – is one that demands patient co-suffering from us. The effort to keep seeing when we wish we did not have to see (at both personal and societal levels), to know what we might prefer to split off from awareness (like some survivors of trauma themselves), and to be with others in their suffering rather than to collude in sealing over the most horrific sources of pain – all these point to practical theology not merely as a theoretical discipline, but as a calling to be in solidarity with those in our care, to face the horror, and to help birth new levels of consciousness at the level of individuals, families, and the larger society.

Such practical theology includes not only pastoral care and counseling, but all forms of public theology as advocacy for justice. Solidarity is not only interpersonal but cultural and political. How do aspects of Raquel’s position in society – including racial, economic, and political realities – impact her ability to grieve, and her community’s capacity to support her and her family in the crucial transition from early shock and horror to deep grieving and meaning-making that can promote healing and new life? How do we embrace our role as witnesses not only of individual sorrows and traumas, but of the societal and political structures that obstruct expressive suffering and perpetuate dehumanization? In the words of trauma specialist Judith Herman, “in order for individual victims to be heard and to be met with justice and restitution, it takes a great deal of effort from the widest possible circle of bystanders [*witnesses!*], a social context of belief and action” (1992: 7).

The cross and resurrection stand as narrative reminders of this practical theological call to witness the suffering of the world. As creatures made in the image and likeness of God, we too are called to be witnesses, *martyrs* in the sense of not shrinking from one another’s cries of pain, but entering into the costly but godly vocation of being-with. By standing as witnesses who offer deep recognition of one another’s pain, we participate in a holy process of transforming mute pain into expressive suffering. Through the shared comprehension of such suffering, transformation becomes possible – healing and renewal for a broken world!



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