

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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The ambiguity of suffering. There is a strange phenomenon in this world, a reality that is both perplexing and ambiguous. It is related to human suffering.

On the one hand, through no outside intent, bad things happen to good people; they just happen. Good, righteous, God-fearing people suffer—through no apparent fault of their own. This was at the heart of the story of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Bible.

Sometimes we experience this with family and friends—people we’ve loved and cared about on the deepest of levels—who suffer heart-wrenching personal loss through disease (usually cancer) or random accidents.

On the other hand, this same human suffering creates in us new possibilities for understanding and feeling that enable us to love and nurture in ways that we perhaps could not before. Therein lies ... *the ambiguity of suffering.*

It’s like our suffering becomes, for us, a gift—a gift of personal growth and deepening, on the other side of suffering—that creates in us a deeper compassion for our human situation. Through our own suffering, our own valley experience, we’re able to relate more to the hurt of others.

That’s why self-help groups, at their best, are so effective. The participants *know* first hand the pain and the struggle that each of them is going through.

Still, the question lingers: *why all the suffering?*

No easy answers. Ultimately, there is no satisfying answer to the problem of human suffering. Certainly, it’s not God’s will. How could a God whose nature and essence is *love* wish suffering and deprivation on anyone? Still, we can’t help but wonder: is God powerless to stop the suffering?

The God who called the world into being and set the earth on its course is not powerless. However, God works through the created order. It’s the way of things. God works through you and me—through human beings—and through the ongoing unfolding of the universe.

The universe, and us along with it, are created in freedom. And as the universe unfolds (as it self-creates), and as we evolve and our lives unfold, every minute, we are making choices. Again, we’re not perfect. Indeed, there is no perfection; only approximations to excellence.

All the time in the creation process, stuff happens. Our creations (automobiles, airplanes, and all of our technological advances) are not perfect. And we who operate them and

implement them are less than perfect as well. Still, things happen: a poor decision here, a lapse in judgment there.

Moreover, there is also the evolution of our bodies. Beyond the obvious, we don't know why we get cancer and other serious afflictions. Of course—always—there are predispositions to illness, like heart disease and diabetes. But again, why all the suffering?

With all the advancements in modern science, much of life remains riddled with mystery and wonder. And so much of what happens—with the unfolding of the universe (i.e., natural disasters) and with disease—is random. Stuff happens that we can't necessarily predict or control. Sometimes it's as simple as wrong place, wrong time.

God and suffering. What the Bible claims and faith teaches is that, while God never wills suffering on any of God's creation, still, through God's infinite grace, God does what God can to use our suffering for good.

This is the *ambiguity of suffering*. That no matter what befalls us, no matter what comes our way in life, God purposes to use it for good.

Part of the *ambiguity* of life is precisely that those who have suffered most are often the ones with the greatest capacity to nurture those who have endured similar deprivations and sufferings.

Part of the challenge for each of us, therefore, is to do what we can to use whatever comes our way for good. In this way, we serve God, doing our part in the realization of God's larger purposes.