

Reflections on the Serenity Prayer
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READING ONE

Book of Job, from chapters 30 and 38

Job said, “Terrors are turned upon me . . . my prosperity has passed away like a cloud. . . . days of affliction have taken hold of me. The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. . . . Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?”

Gospel of John 9.2:

And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.”

Gospel of Luke 13.1-5 There were some present who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with the sacrifices. And he answered them: “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than the others that they suffered thus? I tell you, No Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam collapsed and killed them—do you think they were worse offenders than everyone else in Jerusalem? I tell you, No.

Gospel of Matthew 5.44-45: But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

READING TWO

Adapted by Guy from Gary Snyder's *Practice of the Wild* pages 184, 5, and 150

There is no death that is not somebody's food, no life that is not somebody's death. Some take this a sign that the universe is fundamentally flawed, a valley of sin and sorrow. This leads to disgust with self, with humanity, and with nature. Philosophies that teach us to free ourselves from this world, to put our hopes in another world, end up doing more damage to the planet--and to human psyches--than the pain and suffering that are in the worldly conditions they seek to transcend.

To be truly free one must take on the basic conditions as they are—painful, impermanent, open, imperfect—and then be grateful. The complex human self is needed, but is excessive in that it resists the world. Meditation practice gives us a way to scrape it, soften it, tan it—so that it is flexible and open to the world.

Do you find yourself taking the blame, feeling somehow guilty, when things go wrong? Or do you feel that you are basically helpless to control what happens in the world, and that is therefore pointless to blame yourself when something bad happens?

The venerable Serenity Prayer—adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous, but with a long and confusing earlier history--suggests that the difficult circumstances we encounter in life fall into two categories, and that it is our job first to distinguish which is which and then to respond differently, and appropriately, to each:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.*

This talk is about the problem of finding this wisdom, the problem of figuring out how to draw a line between the circumstances we can change, and for which are responsible, and everything else. It is a truly Unitarian Universalist talk in that I am not going to tell you an answer or THE answer; instead I invite you to follow me along a tangled path of questioning.

When (Princeton theologian) Elaine Pagels' two year-old son was diagnosed with a rare and incurable lung disease, she found that as a parent--and in particular, as a mother--she could not help but blame herself. She struggled with reflexive and painful feelings of guilt--even though, with another part of herself, she knew that the disease was not at all the result of anything she personally could have controlled. This experience led her, as a scholar, to investigate the cultural roots of this phenomenon. She concluded that our religious heritage, our roots in orthodox Christian doctrines as formulated by Augustine of Hippo, lead us unconsciously to accept that suffering and death are punishments for sin. If we suffer, or if our children suffer, it *must* be due to our sin. In Augustine's reading, the original sinfulness of Adam and Even has been passed down, a congenital and sexually transmitted disease, and it is for this sin that we toil and suffer sickness rather than enjoying the paradise on earth originally planned by God. Pagels also found that there were alternative forms of Christian theology, pushed aside by the fourth century A.D., that saw suffering and death NOT as the fruit of sin, but as completely natural parts of the world as made by God, a package deal with the gift of life itself. This was the theology of Julian.

Despite stiff theological competition, the doctrine that “suffering is due to sin” won out in part because it has a powerful psychological appeal. People are strongly motivated to develop and to maintain views of the world that are coherent and provide a context of meaning and purpose for their lives. If—and ONLY if--the victims of violence, or sickness, or natural catastrophes, are in fact guilty of some sin whereby their suffering is justly merited, then the workings of the universe are morally well-ordered, and God is good. In other words, to find the victim innocent is to find the universe, and its God, guilty. Blaming the victim is really the only pious thing to do. And his pattern is not some unique quirk of orthodox Christianity: one finds it in ancient Taoism, where the ill were sent to do penance in order to be healed. And in Buddhism, where one finds even the very liberal Dalai Lama--asked by Larry King to comment on Katrina’s devastation of New Orleans--transmitting the traditional Buddhist doctrine that no one experiences *any* suffering that is not primarily the result of one’s own past actions.

If others are guilty when they suffer, it naturally follows that YOU must be guilty when you suffer. For if you are not guilty, but you are still suffering terribly, there are a number of really troubling

implications: (1) As we have seen, the universe is fundamentally unjust because it allows the suffering of the innocent; and, moreover, (2) *you are helpless to avoid suffering in the future* because even if you are blameless, you could still be beset by even more horrible afflictions.

It is this sense of helplessness that is the focus of many of Elaine Pagels' comments in an interview she did on PBS with Bill Moyers. She tells the story of a Native American tribe going out a ridge to pray for the sunrise every dawn. When an ethnographer asked them, "What would happen if you did not say your prayers?" an elder replied, "What? You would plunge the world into darkness for the sake of your silly experiment?" Pagels argues that people are very powerfully motivated to feel and to express a sense of control over their environments. In brief, faced with some horrible natural event, people feel they have to choose between blaming themselves and admitting impotence in the face of an unjust world. And, generally, people find it very much easier, much more comforting, to blame themselves, to feel guilty, rather than to admit the extent of their helplessness.

But the strange comfort, the sense of power, it gives us does not mean that guilt is always a good or healthy choice. The truth is

that we are, quite often, helpless to control whether our loved ones are safe, whether they are healthy, or when they will die. We want to believe these are things we can control because these things are extremely important to us. [It is painful to admit that we really do not control them; it is easier to blame ourselves.] Rabbi Harold Kushner (pp 101-102) tells the story of officiating at two successive funerals for elderly women, both of whom had died natural deaths, full of years. When he visited the home of the first deceased, the son said to him: “If only I had sent my mother to Florida and gotten her out of this cold and snow, she would be alive today. It is my fault she died.” At the second home, the son of the other deceased said, “If only I hadn’t insisted on my mother’s going to Florida, she would be alive today. That long airplane ride, the abrupt change of climate, was more than she could take. It is my fault she died.”

The charm of this story is the way it allows us to laugh at ourselves, showing the absurdity of the self-imposed torment we add to the inevitable grief of loss. I personally have attended the death of a close friend, and again I watched over and medicated my father in his final days. Both times my mind somehow contrived to find things to blame myself for. Just as Pagels describes, these feelings

of self-accusation were quite strong, and it took a long time for me to share them with anyone.

Of course, when we face challenges, problems that really *can* be solved or risks that can be limited, it is important to have confidence, to take a can-do attitude, to believe in our own capacity to affect the outcome. Some studies of patients with cancer have suggested that certain positive attitudes--including belief in one's own power to take actions leading to healing—are correlated with more positive outcomes. Other large-scale studies have found that no evidence for such claims. In any case, the power of positive thinking has a huge role in history of American religion, American business, and the area of popular self-help literature. Some even argue, or assume, that all disease—and all health--is an expression of one's mental attitude.

It is clear, and important to recognize, that we experience mental anguish—depression, anxiety, traumatic memories—in our bodies, as physical suffering. On the other hand, sometimes we have gone too far in reducing physical illness to an expression of one's attitude. For example, “until the bacillus that causes tuberculosis was identified, TB was thought to be a result of having

a "tubercular personality", characterized as sentimental, sensitive, poetic. Until the bacterium that causes many peptic ulcers was identified, ulcers were thought always to be caused by repressed anger."ⁱ More recently, there have been those who have argued that predispositions to cancer and heart disease are the result of two different types of unhealthy coping styles--the "cancer personality" is uptight, negative, and passive while the heart disease person is aggressive and explosive. We have to be careful in studying theories like this. It is vital to investigate the relationship between mental states and physical health. At the same time, we know that many researchers, as human beings, will be strongly motivated to believe that crippling and mortal diseases arise from the mental character of the victims. For if this is true, then (1) not having that sort of character makes one safe and (2) changing one's mind gives one control over the disease process.

But remember, along with control, if we do have control, then we again have the blame. If people get diseases that are physical manifestations of their personalities, then patients are not just empowered to take charge of their own healing. They are also to blame for their sickness, and for their failure to heal, and ultimately even for their own deaths. When my friend Mary was diagnosed

with brain cancer, her next door neighbor told me, “All sickness is in the mind; if Mary would think positive thoughts she will be healed.” Regrettably, Mary was guilty of being inadequately positive; she died within the year. On the other hand, her neighbor had the consolation of knowing that she herself was invulnerable to any such a fate, protected by a shield of positive mental energy.

Or, let’s take a very different example: Today rape survivors still find themselves blamed repeatedly, explicitly and implicitly, for somehow precipitating their rapes. Unconsciously, people comfort themselves that they—or their children—will be safe as long as they avoid any walking at night, wearing the wrong clothes, going to the wrong parties, dating the wrong people, etc. In addition to trauma and societal blame, survivors very often find they must grapple with their own feelings of guilt and self-loathing.

The abuse of children is the real original sin that Augustine should have been told us about.ⁱⁱ From generation to generation, millions of survivors spend their lives working with the psychic damage inflicted by their abusers. Many are plagued by profound feelings of guilt—arising in part, once again, because it is much easier to feel guilty, even terribly and inappropriately guilty, than to

admit to oneself just how profoundly helpless one was as a victimized child.

As Elaine Pagels discovered when her son Mark was dying, the hard work of healing sometimes involves moving toward acceptance of the grossly unacceptable, acknowledgment of unimaginably painful things, terrible things that one *cannot* change and that one *could not* have avoided even by being a super-good person. This is the way the world is, and only by facing it can we begin to heal. Alan Watts called this the “wisdom of *insecurity*”. It is not the fairy tale we tell have told ourselves about the world, on sale at many religious institutions. Pagels found that, as tempting and natural-SEEMING as it was to blame herself, ultimately it was healthier to acknowledge in a very deep way that she was helpless to cure her son and that she was helpless to have prevented the disease that took her son. She was not to blame.

But then: if some of us blame ourselves when it would be wiser/healthier not to do so, a great share of the world’s problems must be found in people’s failure to blame themselves when they certainly should, failing to hold themselves responsible when they have hurt or violated others. Kushner gives the example of the man

who abandons his wife and children and is plagued with guilt. He goes to the rabbi for advice, but what he wants is improper and quite specific: He does *not* want advice on making amends to his family. He just wants advice on how to stop feeling these uncomfortable feelings of---GUILT.

When we make choices that cause sorrow, when we are callous to the suffering we cause others, we are irresponsible. An appropriate, balanced sense of guilt, of conscience, of taking responsibility and making amends—this is the moral cause for so much that is *good* in human life. I will speculatively nominate this capacity for self-reproach as something that makes us the special primate that we are. Seeing our moral shortcomings and aspiring to do better—this is a theme one finds in spiritual cultures throughout the world.

It is only when this powerful capacity is taken too far, overextended, that it morphs into a psychological and spiritual obstacle. I am reminded of the poet John Berryman, who—struggling with alcoholism and depression—experienced a profound conversion to Christianity and wrote eloquent poetry praising the human capacity for moral self-reproach.ⁱⁱⁱ Then he killed himself by jumping off a bridge. Self-reproach is great, when

appropriate, up to a point. Finding that point is the “wisdom to know the difference” to which the serenity prayer aspires.

Recognizing that some things, many things, ARE our responsibility, we have to have great courage to change. It is hard for us even to look at ourselves. It is hard for us to change engrained unhealthy behavior patterns, even when we see them clearly. Often we need help—from our friends, our families, our therapist, our church.

And, beyond all this, it is hard to see and harder to change the ways in which—even when our intentions are pure—we are implicated in the oppression, hunger, the victimization of others who don’t participate in the abundance—the excess and waste—of our small, elite class. Two recent films, *Crash* and *Babel*, explore how the vast webs of interconnections between people are morally charged, even when the people themselves do not know each other and have never met. We are implicated **by** the institutions and social practices that we participate in and benefit from. We are implicated **in** the harm these practices bring to others across town and around the world.

Sometimes, the road to hell **is** paved with good intentions. Ironically, it may be that we do the greatest harm to others not

through intentional acts of ill-will, but through our participation in capitalism, neo-colonialism, institutional racism, unconscious sexism and heterosexism, reckless pollution, and blindly wasteful consumption. Changing government policies, or well-established social and economic practices, is very hard, so hard that we might despair; before we start we are ready to give up. When we try to exercise the courage to change, we quickly understand why the Serenity Prayer is a prayer to God, to a higher power--a *much* higher power.

As in the case of the Civil Rights movement being led by ministers singing Christian hymns, as in the case of Gandhi's religious revolution against British colonialism, many of us need the inspiration and strength we draw from our connections to powers greater than ourselves. The abolition of slavery is yet another instance where a powerfully entrenched and grossly unjust socio-economic practice--something that seemed to many at the time to be as natural and unchangeable as the law of gravity--was brought down by individuals inspired by their sense of the divine. The song *Amazing Grace* depicts the spiritual death/rebirth of its author, John Newton, a slave ship captain, as he became a Christian, starting

down a hard path of change that would *eventually* lead to his becoming an abolitionist minister.

While this is not a universal experience--not a pattern common to us all--it is a common theme in traditions throughout the world that our isolated personal ego has to be broken down/broken open before we can cross over to a transformed life and a reformed world. We must, in some sense, die to our old selves as we become--and in order to become--reborn as someone new. Only when our rigid sense of an isolated self, set apart from the world, fades or softens, can we open to help and be helped by the whole world. Our vulnerability is a new kind of power—a power that comes from everywhere else, from the energy of our now-living connections with community, nature, and the nameless source of all.

A way to think about how all of this fits together comes to me from Valerie, who has worked with hundreds of clients as they have struggled to find the courage to change what needs to be changed, the serenity to accept what can't be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference. She reports two patterns among clients who as children have suffered trauma, abuse, and ridicule. Some adult survivors attempt to cope, to defend themselves, by “staying in

control” of everything around them in their environments. They are often high-achievers, but run into problems in personal relationships as they try to exercise the control they need to feel safe.

Subconsciously they believe that bad things happened to them because they failed to control, they were not good enough at controlling, their environments when they were children. Now it is hard work, going very much against the grain, for them to open themselves, letting themselves be vulnerable. Even being very good is not good enough to guarantee safety. As they find the serenity to accept that they cannot control many aspects of their environments, they are learning the lesson Elaine Pagels learned.

But some survivors of childhood abuse go in the other direction. They learn the lesson of their own helplessness far too well, falling into passivity and depression. How can they find the courage to change, to believe that their choices matter, their actions count—when, as children, nothing they did ever made any difference in their abuse?

It is so very hard to find the right balance that avoids the “all or nothing” approach behind both of these responses. A rigid, controlling, impermeable sense of self shuts out the power we draw from open connections to others. An obliterated or utterly passive

self cannot take initiative and act responsibly for the welfare of oneself and others. [Poet and essayist] Gary Snyder calls for us to use spiritual practice to develop a sense of self like well-tanned leather--soft and permeable, yet tough.

We must accept some painful, imperfect things and NOT despise the world or ourselves because they are as they are. And we must never accept some other things, even though changing them takes decades or generations. When we have the wisdom to know the difference, we can freely open ourselves to the world—but not in meek surrender. We have the power of the world in us, flowing through us. We can choose and we can act to bring about change.

The mystery, the nameless source of all change, appears to Job in a whirlwind. I choose to read the text this way: To the stricken Job, the Lord is saying: You don't hear me denying that the world is full of absolutely inexplicable pain and injustice. You cannot avoid terrible suffering by being a good Jew or a nice man. Yet the world is also amazing. It is awesome. It did not have to be here at all, and yet it is. This is my big miracle. There is an incredible, mysterious power in it, and right now that power is speaking to you and speaking *through* you, for you do not exist without it. Now what

are you going to do with your short time? Moaning is just one option, good for a while in a time of grief.

In three different contexts, in three different Gospels, Jesus refuses to accept that that piety requires blaming the victim. He denies that blindness, buildings falling on people, or getting killed by Pilate are cases of unusually sinful people getting their comeuppance. Rain and sun fall on everyone, good or bad--there is no one to blame, neither parents, nor bad karma, nor an unjust God. It's no one's fault--even in Australia, there are bad days sometimes.^{iv} That is the way it is. We are like the man born blind in that everyone, mysteriously and yet very naturally, receives certain powers and capacities—and does not receive others. We are *all* differently abled. It is amazing--and also excruciating.

It is terrific and terrifying that all of these things, the whole universe, appears out of no-one knows-where; and no one knows, finally, why. We were never asked if we wanted to be here, and it's a beautiful, horrible, mess. The beauty is free, not a reward; the pain of the world, likewise, is not a punishment. It *is* a package deal, a natural thing, as Julian taught. Let's walk together, let's work together—let's make every effort, even against odds, to do the best we can with what has been given to us, like grace, undeserved.

Sources

1. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* by Elaine Pagels
2. *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*
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- 3.. *Cancer as Metaphor* by Rick Fields at
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4. *Conversations with Valerie Stephens, Ph.D.*
5. *Dream Songs* by John Berryman
6. *Disease as Metapor* by Susan Sontag
7. *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn
8. *Guilt and Suffering in Christianity*: Elaine Pagels DVD from pbs.org
9. *How to Practice* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama
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12. *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing who you are* by Alan Watts
13. *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky
14. *The Gospel According to Thomas* by Elaine Pagels
15. *The Oxford Annotated Bible*
16. *The Wisdom of Insecurity* by Alan Watts
17. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner

Notes

ⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/04/reviews/970504.04tavrist.html>

ⁱⁱ Actually, Augustine is much concerned with the abuse of children, especially but not only child sex slavery. He takes this not *as* original sin, but as a proof of his dogma that human nature itself must have been primordially corrupted—rendered depraved--by Adam's fall.

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Dream Songs* by John Berryman.

^{iv} from *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, the children's book read by Valerie earlier in the service.