

**Chronic Pain:
An Invitation to Spiritual Growth**

by

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Introduction:

My reason for choosing this topic is because I personally have been living with chronic pain for several years now. When I first experienced the pain of arthritis there were a number of different responses to my situation. In common with much of today's penchant for wanting to 'fix things' a number of people attempted to explain the reason for my pain. There were suggestions as how to relieve the pain often with little understanding of my medical problems and personal circumstances. A few people thought that as I was a Christian I should not have to live with the pain of arthritis. Some prayed for a total healing and were bewildered when this didn't happen; this despite much prayer and having been anointed with oil on a number of occasions. Questions were raised about the role of prayer, the place of miracles and healing for those, who because of a chronic medical condition, have to live with some degree of pain. How can others pray and support someone who experiences pain on a daily basis? For me it has been a process of learning to live with chronic pain, of finding meaning for my life apart from pain and refusing to allow pain to dominate my life. How do we as Christians deal with pain in a way that enables us to grow and deepen our relationship with God rather than alienating us from society and distancing ourselves from God? What role does spiritual direction play in enabling people to grow spiritually despite a pain-filled life?

Defining Pain

Pain is something we will all encounter sometime during our lifetime although the severity and type of pain will differ. Some pain is acute, severe and short lived. It can be relieved with appropriate treatment. However for some people life is characterised by pain which despite all attempts at relief persists: this is chronic pain. Pain has many causes and affects different parts of a person's body. Pain can be physical or emotional but for the purpose of this paper I will limit my discussion to chronic physical pain although the emotional effects are also important and it is hard sometimes to differentiate between cause and effect. In this context my definition of chronic pain is physical discomfort that lasts without relief for a certain period of time.¹ Another definition is that pain, in the physical sense, is a feeling of distress, suffering or agony,

¹ Koller, Nathan R. Towards A Spirituality of Pain

caused by stimulation of specialised nerve endings. Pain has a purpose; it acts as a warning that early tissue damage is taking place somewhere in the body.²

Is Pain the Enemy?

But pain is not something to be tolerated in today's world! It is seen by the media especially as the enemy which must be overcome.³ There is no end to the number of products purported to minimise or reduce pain and the quest for a pain free life continues. Yet it is only in the last 150 years that effective pain relief has been developed. The use of nitrous oxide to ease the pain of women in labour created huge controversy when it was first introduced as people debated whether pain relief was a sign of God's grace or modern man's attempt to avoid the natural consequences of original sin.⁴ Since then a greater understanding of how pain can be relieved has led to a plethora of medicines being readily available. But despite the many methods used to help relieve pain there is still much to understand about pain.

Dr. Paul Brand, who worked with leprosy patients for many years, saw the awful effects the absence of pain had on these people. Because they felt no pain these people were oblivious to injury. They presented at the hospital with grossly damaged limbs as a result of loss of sensation following nerve damage caused by the leprosy bacteria. He appreciated, more than most people, the value of pain acting as a warning and thus serving to prevent further injury. Over time he came to view pain as a gift even if an 'unwelcome' gift.

The Mechanism of Pain⁵

The pain signal begins with an alarm which goes off when nerve endings sense danger. The pain signal can be blocked before it reaches the brain. The spinal cord and base of the brain act as a gate to sort out which of the many millions of signals from different parts of the body deserve to be forwarded to the brain. There the pre screened messages are sorted and the brain decides on a response. Pain doesn't exist until the entire cycle

² Miller, Benjamin F, and Brachman Keane, Claire Encyclopaedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health

³ Brand, Paul, with Yancey, Philip Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants – A Surgeon's Journey of Discovery p. 188

⁴ Cusick, Jason Rev. Spirituality and Voluntary Pain

⁵ Brand p. 201-202

of signal, message, and response has been completed.⁶ It is what takes place in the mind that is the most important aspect of pain and it is there that the battle to master pain is fought. If we succeed pain is kept in its proper place as servant and not master.⁷ The mind has the ability to alter the perception of pain and we can learn to harness the vast resources of the conscious mind to help cope with pain. Pain is probably the least understood and most ineptly treated subject in medicine today and there is much still to be learnt.⁸

The Effects of Pain

Pain, being subjective, cannot be measured. It is the loneliest, most private sensation.⁹ Pain provides us with a warning but we have to be able to listen to what it is telling us. In today's world, with the emphasis on being pain free, there is little emphasis on listening to the messages of pain. Brand advises us to 'take what is ordinarily seen as an enemy and to disarm and then welcome it'. To 'befriend' pain¹⁰ he suggests that we develop a sense of gratitude; to be grateful that our body is working as it was designed to work. Only after we have listened can we begin to respond to pain's message. If pain is seen as the enemy then the opposite is true; we respond with bitterness or vengeance. The impact of emotions on health has been well documented.¹¹ Pain, especially when the cause is unknown, can plunge us deep into fear of the future forcing us to embark on a quest to find the cause and resolve the fear.¹² Fear is one of the strongest intensifiers of pain; other emotions such as anger, guilt, loneliness and helplessness also help to intensify pain.¹³ Research suggests that loneliness may effect not merely the perception of pain but actual bodily health¹⁴ while the presence of a caring person can have an actual and measurable effect on pain and on healing.¹⁵ Dormant spirituality is another negative effect of pain. When our situation remains unchanged we may think that God doesn't hear or answer our prayers! We may question God's goodness and blame Him for the way things are. We may resent

⁶ Ibid p. 202

⁷ Ibid p. 203

⁸ Helminiak, Daniel A. Modern Science on Pain and Suffering: A Christian Perspective

⁹ Brand p. 209

¹⁰ Ibid p. 204

¹¹ Ibid p. 222

¹² Kollar, Nathan R. Towards a Spirituality of Pain

¹³ Brand p. 262

¹⁴ Ibid footnote p. 276

¹⁵ Ibid p. 275

the unfairness of life and give up on prayer.¹⁶ Where there is chronic pain there is also the emotional distress of loss; these losses include loss of health, loss of independence and loss of financial security. It can be very difficult to maintain our faith in God especially if we have been taught that God will heal us when we have enough ‘faith’.

The Language of Pain¹⁷

Pain is the way our body warns us that significant change is occurring. Perception of pain varies greatly and is dependent upon our social and personal environment. Unknown pain can seem more intense as fear exacerbates what we experience. We respond to pain differently depending upon our past experience with it. If as a child, we were encouraged to dwell on our pain, when we are an adult we will probably talk about it and want others to sympathize with us. If our pain was acknowledged but we were expected to continue with whatever we were doing, we will accept most ordinary pain as part of life. Also people in different cultures experience pain differently¹⁸. Pain has its own language which differs as to who is speaking.

Making ‘Sense’ of Pain

Our Christian traditions and spiritualities come from the time when it was taken for granted that we could not live without pain and we could do nothing about the pain but pray.¹⁹ Despite the availability of methods to relieve pain Kollar states it is not possible to have a pain free spirituality. Any spirituality which offers an escape from pain is offering an escape from our humanity and its responsibilities. This does not mean that we should accept or live with all pain. Bad pain must be dealt with as we deal with any evil. What is our understanding of pain and how to deal with it? Spiritual interpretations of pain include, on the one hand, believing pain is a form of divine punishment; pain is a test to discover one’s own limits, or pain is seen as a means of gaining or retaining control. On the other hand there is the potential for spiritual transformation through pain. As a man recovering from knee surgery, who was not taking all the pain medication prescribed, said, “A little pain is good for the soul.”²⁰

¹⁶ Fein, Judith Chronic Pain/ List these D’s on Your Refrigerator

¹⁷ Kollar, Nathan R. Toward a Spirituality of Pain

¹⁸ Brand p 208 - 209

¹⁹ Kollar

²⁰ Cusick

Acceptance of Pain²¹

Chronic pain is not so much a problem to be solved but rather a reality to be accepted. This doesn't mean acceptance of needless suffering as there are many pain medications which can reduce the pain to a more tolerable level. Nor does acceptance mean giving up all hope or accepting another person's version of one's condition. Healthy acceptance means recognizing the futility of struggling against realities that are beyond one's control. Acceptance is coming to terms mentally and emotionally with that reality and in so doing it reduces stress and promotes peace of mind. Conversely fighting against pain takes a toll physically, emotionally and mentally. Muscles and joints become stiff, one becomes tense and irritable and even exhausted by the continual battle against pain.

At a deeper level acceptance may take the form of spiritual surrender; a handing of the situation over to God. This releasing of what we cannot change can bring relief and peace of mind. The increased clarity of thought that follows can actually enhance the person's ability to cope with pain. Pain does not have to retard spiritual growth. The Serenity Prayer neatly summarizes spiritual surrender:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”²²

Another person speaks of their journey in these words:

“I have no doubt that my illness has produced a different person than I would have been had I been blessed with health. In retrospect, I must confess that the very thing that I would have been most tempted to change about myself, my poor health, may be the very thing that taught me the most valuable lessons, gave me the clearest perspective and produced in me the strongest faith.”²³

Theological Perspective

In any discussion about pain the question of ‘Why?’ arises especially when it becomes chronic pain. Job asked that question when his life began to unravel and he experienced severe pain. He continued to repeat his question until God appeared to him. Then he is

²¹ Hanson, Richard W. Acceptance of Pain and Disability

²² Hanson

²³ Maupin, Craig Spiritual Growth Through Hardship p 4

confronted with the mystery of God and he never does get an explanation for his suffering. His friends attempted to answer his question with the conventional wisdom of the day but Job rejected their advice. According to them Job's suffering was a result of specific sin and he is urged to repent of his sin. They believed anyone who lived a moral life was exempt from suffering. It is no different today as some people presume that pain must be a result of sin in a person's life. But there is no real correlation between the wrong we commit and the amount of pain we experience as Job's experience vividly demonstrates. He suffers more not less for his commitment to follow God. Like Job we may never know the answer to the question "Why". But we can experience God's love in ways previously unknown. Living with uncertainty is an opportunity to experience God's grace.

Pain and Spiritual Health

Having briefly looked at some of the factors associated with pain I want to consider how best to support the person living with chronic pain at a time of increased vulnerability. Some people believe there is a direct relationship between physical illness and one's spiritual state but the absence of pain doesn't prove the spiritual health of a person just as the presence of pain is not a measure of a person's spiritual ill health. Of those who seek healing some try to live a good life, meditate and pray in an effort to be healed. Some may experience healing but others do not. The result is the healed person's spiritual self image soars while the unhealed person's spiritual worth is crushed. Despite the most difficult illness, one's spiritual health can be vibrantly alive!²⁴ Lives are transformed, deepened, marked with beauty and holiness in remarkable ways that could never have been anticipated before the suffering. The invitation is not to focus on preventing suffering but rather to enter the mystery and look around for God.²⁵ It is important to remember that pain is only one aspect of our life and our living.²⁶

Pain and the Role of the Mind

Brand suggests that preparing for pain while still healthy is good "insurance". As part of the preparation he begins with the value of gratitude; being grateful for the warning

²⁴ Maupin, Craig p 30

²⁵ Peterson, Eugene [Introduction to Job](#) The Message

²⁶ Kollar

pain gives us that something is wrong. He also advocates listening to pain (rather than silencing it as is the modern trend) along with physical activity and the practice of spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation, which he calls self-mastery, as part of this preparation. Prayer helps by moving the mental focus away from a fixation on the body's pain to focussing on listening for the voice of God. If prayer and meditation are already part of our daily life then it is easier to continue these practices when battling with chronic pain. Becoming part of a loving and caring community who will support us when trouble comes is the final preparation.²⁷ M. Scott Peck writes "the most healing thing we can do with someone who is in pain, rather than trying to get rid of the pain, is to sit there and be willing to share it."²⁸

Because pain is perceived in the brain we do have some control over pain. Brand writes of Barbara Wolf who battled with chronic pain. After trying numerous methods in an attempt to control her pain she decided that distraction was the best and cheapest weapon available. She used to cancel activities when she felt pain until she noticed that it was when she was teaching English that she felt free of pain. The real challenge then is to exercise and increase productive activity despite the feeling of pain.²⁹ Brand recounts a time when he was experiencing severe abdominal pain. Rather than resorting to pain medication he went walking barefoot over a shell gravel path. The shells were very sharp and the flood of sensations from shells on his bare feet competed with the abdominal pain. The pain he then felt from walking on the shells was more tolerable and he was able to change the focus from the severe abdominal pain to the lesser pain caused by walking on the shell path.³⁰

My Own Journey

When I first began this journey the suddenness of the onset of arthritis caught me by surprise. I was bewildered by the changes in lifestyle that occurred. Things which I took for granted now required careful planning and I had to set priorities to conserve my low energy levels and minimize the pain. Although I had people who gave me lots of advice, I was supported by a number of people who didn't try to explain why I was

²⁷ Brand p. 236

²⁸ Peck, M. Scott Further Along the Road Less Travelled – The Unending Journey Toward Spiritual Growth p. 28

²⁹ Brand p. 254

³⁰ Ibid p. 246

suffering in this way. My spiritual director was one of these special people. As I explored my feelings with her help I had a picture of a brick wall in front of me which was blocking the path ahead. It was only later that I was able to see that this image, which I saw as a barrier blocking my progress, was also a picture of protection and shelter. As time went by the picture changed. The brick wall became a pile of bricks which had to be cleared from the path before I could proceed along the path. This clearing away took longer than I expected and the path then took me in a different direction. During this time I had a number of dreams which reflected issues I was being challenged with and again my spiritual director helped me to understand the messages of these dreams. I became aware that things which had been important to me, such as my job, had been taken from me and I was left with a feeling of loss and bewilderment as I tried to make sense of who I was. I could no longer be defined by what I did as I had had to give up working! There were a number of losses that I had to acknowledge and I found Joyce Rupp's book *Praying Our Goodbyes* and especially the chapter "I Know How The Flowers Felt" helped me to make to make sense of what was happening to me. But I also discovered I had the gift of time. I had time to ponder who I was becoming. This was a gift that most people didn't have!

Previously my image of God had been one of someone who was there when I needed him but when my life flowed smoothly I thought I could manage without God's help. I had felt secure in my independence but now I was dependent on others for help with routine tasks. When I was asked by my spiritual director to say how God was for me at that time I was uncertain as to how to answer. But as I thought about my reliance on crutches to walk that was an image that I could apply to God. He was my crutch; not in a way that took away my responsibility but as a very necessary part of my life. I was forced to acknowledge my helplessness to change my situation; it was only through reliance on God's help that I was able to function. Later, when I was on a retreat, I read Joyce Rupp's poem "Leaning on God". Several of the questions which followed caught my attention. "Would I take God into the hidden parts of my life?" This involved a deeper level of surrender. "Would I trust God to raise up the good things in me that had died?"³¹ This opened up the possibility of something being birthed in me again and gave me a sense of hope. A scripture verse that has been a key encouragement to me is

³¹ Rupp, Joyce p. May I Have This Dance p.51-52

“My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.”³² Aware of my own weakness I have to put my trust in God and depend on him. Even today I am brought back to the truth of this verse as I live each day with some degree of pain. From being a person who tended to live in the future, I am now trying to live a day at a time. “Do not worry about tomorrow; it will have enough worries of its own. There is no need to add to the troubles each day brings.”³³

Spiritual Direction for a Person Living with Chronic Pain

When a person is living with chronic pain and trying to come to some acceptance of the reality of their pain and their helplessness to change that reality then the spiritual director is in a unique position to help: Someone who can listen to the questions being asked as well as the unspoken thoughts. May suggests “When a person in great pain is screaming ‘Why?’ that person is really looking for God.”³⁴ The spiritual director is in a position to support that person as they make the difficult adjustment to living with pain and as they seek to find meaning amidst their pain. This may be the first time a person has ever considered spiritual direction. Margaret Guenther uses the imagery of a midwife to explain the role of the spiritual director and especially so when a person is in a process of transition. “The director can see patterns and form in seeming formlessness.The midwife-director can help (the directee) to let go, to cease to struggle and to watch attentively for the next stage. Transition is a time of surprises; the director can help by pointing out signs in unexpected places.”³⁵ A spiritual director has an objectivity that the person in pain cannot have. Rupp in her book, *Praying Our Goodbyes*, looks at a spirituality of change. She addresses the problem of suffering and how our images of God influence the way we react. She includes specific prayers and a meditation from scripture for a range of different situations. Kollar asks some crucial questions which can help in this time of transition.

- Does our pain-filled suffering improve our ability to live creatively with ambiguity, uncertainty, even chaos? After all, these are parts of life, so we must be able to live and work in their midst even though there are no criteria for judging with certainty that we are responding properly to them.
- Are we growing in the Spirit?

³² 2 Corinthians 12: 9 The Message: New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs 1996

³³ Matthew 6:34 Good News Bible

³⁴ May, Gerald p. 211 Care Of Mind: Care Of Spirit

- Is there a deeper awareness of God's presence in our own life and the life of the world?
- Are we growing in love that is self-giving?³⁶

These are tough questions!

Conclusion:

It is very difficult to discern what God might be saying when one's mind is numbed by pain but as Dr Brand stresses we can prepare in advance. We need not be overwhelmed by chronic pain if we are part of a caring community and have the support of others to accompany us when difficult times come as they surely do. Those in pastoral ministry are not always equipped to accompany someone on this journey of discovery and growth especially if the focus is on finding solutions. A sensitive and informed spiritual director can be a key means of God's support for the person living with chronic pain. We can choose to 'befriend' the pain; to let go of the need to be in control of our lives and to surrender our lives to God; to trust him for the uncertainties of life. Pain doesn't have to control our lives! Because the perception of pain originates in the mind we can use the resources of our mind to enable us cope with the pain. We can use this 'unwelcome gift' as an opportunity to deepen our experience of God in the knowledge that he understands our suffering and is with us even when we feel alone.³⁷

³⁵ Guenther, Margaret p. 104

³⁶ Kollar, Nathan R. [Toward a Spirituality of Pain](#)

³⁷ Matthew 28:20 Good News Bible

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