

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?
Part III:**

**“Why Do Bad Things Happen
to Good People?
Exploring Theodicy”**

**by
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“If God exists, he’s really got it in for Haiti. Haitians think so, too,” writes columnist Pooja Bhatia in an op-ed in the *New York Times* January 14. A Haitian woman told her that God was angry at sinners around the world, but especially in Haiti, and that she understood the earthquake as an act of divine retribution.

This is one way to make sense out of tragedy and loss. And when confronted with massive suffering, the human mind does seek to make sense of it. But if someone emerges alive from the rubble in Port au Prince, saying “God saved me!” does that mean they had fewer sins than the people who died in the earthquake?

There is an entire area of theological debate devoted to the problem of suffering. It’s called “theodicy.” Made from two Greek words: *theos* (which means God) and *dike* (which means justice), theodicy attempts to justify the goodness of God in the face of the prevalence of suffering in the world.

You see, the “problem of suffering” is a problem not just because of the pain and agony that suffering causes. It’s a problem because so much suffering exists in a world that is supposed to be orderly and just, in a world that is supposedly “watched over” by a good and loving God. The problem of suffering is a problem because suffering comes to both the righteous and the wicked, to use traditional terms. Suffering is universal.

We take up the topic of theodicy today, in our series of “What Do You Believe” sermons, not only to speak to a thorny issue for theists, but to help all of us, agnostics, humanists, mystics, Buddhists, pagans, and atheists alike, to think about what we believe about the brokenness in the world, and from what belief system we respond to our own personal suffering and to the suffering of others.

The classic dilemma in this area of theology is: If God is both all-loving and all-powerful, how can God allow suffering? Either God is *able* to prevent suffering and does not (which would make God all-powerful but *not* loving) or God is willing to prevent suffering but *cannot* (which would make God loving, but *not* all-powerful). You can’t have both and have it make sense.

If you are a theist, one way out of the conundrum is to argue that God is not really all-powerful. God cannot stop suffering, but can be present with those who suffer to give them strength to endure. Another way out of the dilemma is to say that God is not all-loving, and brings suffering upon people as punishment for their sins. But what about if the suffering far exceeds the sin? Or when we cannot discern any sin or wrong-doing on the part of the sufferer?

Think about the Holocaust, or the slave trade, or the Cherokee Trail of Tears. Think about the forced internment of Japanese Americans, the Tuskegee syphilis experiments performed on African American men without their knowledge, the shootings in public schools such as Littleton, Colorado, the suicide hijacking on September 11. Think of the terrible ordinariness of domestic violence, rape, and child abuse. Think of the slow deterioration of Lou Gehrig's disease, or sudden death from a car accident. Think of a child with terminal cancer, or AIDS.

The contemporary way of articulating the issue of theodicy is by asking, why do bad things happen to good people? The answers vary.

When faced with inexplicable suffering, some people explain it by saying, everything has a reason — this is part of God's plan. Or, God doesn't send us more suffering than we can handle; when God closes a door, he opens a window. Or, this is a test, I'll be stronger because of it. Or, it'll all be made right in heaven. Just get me through this vale of sorrow, there will be no sickness, toil or danger in that bright land to where I go.

In the face of the agony of suffering, its random and unfair distribution, these explanations seem to me inadequate at best, and harmful at worst. Yet I know that these answers come from people who are trying to absorb pain that is too big to handle. And I know these answers stem from a long history of theological arguments that go back at least as far as the bible.

Best-selling author and biblical scholar Bart Ehrman describes in his book *God's Problem*, how contemporary beliefs about suffering can be traced back to various perspectives found in the bible.

For example, suffering as punishment for sin is exhorted by the biblical prophets.

Suffering as a test for the faithful, and a mystery beyond comprehension, is elaborated in the Book of Job.

The view that this world is a mess and suffering is random is proposed by the author of Ecclesiastes, who recommends that since life is short, we should eat, drink and be merry while we can.

The apocalyptic writers claim that suffering comes from God's cosmic enemies and is targeted against those who are trying to do God's will.

The bible disagrees with itself on the subject of suffering, among other things. None of the reasons for suffering given in the bible seem adequate to me.

If suffering is a punishment for sin, as the prophets say, then why should an innocent child die of malaria, or hunger or AIDS?

If it's God's enemies who cause suffering for those who are doing God's work, then why do people who are not doing God's work also suffer?

If suffering is a test, and we fail, then what's the point? Why would God want to destroy people's faith? Why would God want more broken people?

If suffering is a mystery beyond our comprehension, if we can't understand it, then what moral obligation do we have to alleviate suffering?

If suffering happens because people have free will and choose to do bad things to each other, then how do we account for earthquakes, hurricanes, droughts and tsunamis? These are acts of nature that have nothing to do with human choices. Earthquakes often happen underneath the ocean. Is there a sinner living down there that God is trying to punish? I think not.

One way to solve "God's problem" is to become an atheist. And sometimes this happens to people as they reason their way through the problem of suffering, or if they have a crisis of faith. The amount of suffering in the world is, in a way, proof that there is no God. And if there is no God, we don't have to figure out how God can allow suffering. But we still have to figure out how to live with suffering and find purpose in life.

Kate Braestrup was happily married and raising four children in a small town in the state of Maine, when her husband, who worked as a state trooper, was killed in a car accident. She transformed her suffering and grief into a vocation when she decided to become a Unitarian Universalist minister who works as a chaplain for search and rescue missions in the Maine woods.

In her book *Here If You Need Me*, she tells real life stories of bad things that happen to good people.

"A six-year-old girl has wandered off from a family picnic near Masquinongy Pond, and she remains missing after a long day of waiting. The Maine Warden service has mounted a search. There are dozens of people combing the woods near the picnic grounds. . . Handlers from the warden service K-9 unit have brought dogs trained to find people, and dogs trained to alert to the signature scent of a cadaver.

"The parents may or may not know about the cadaver dogs. They do know this much: they love their child, and their child wanders in an inhospitable environment. They know the dark is coming on. They have been told that the Maine Warden service chaplain has been called. What else could this be about but death?"

This story has a happy ending. One of the search and rescue dogs finds the girl alive, sleeping under a brush pile. Long after dark, long after midnight, the dog's cold nose awakens the girl, and a warden asks if she'd like help getting up.

"No, thank you," she says, and they walk out of the woods together. The girl is delivered safely into the arms of her parents, and the chaplain's job at that moment is to rejoice with them.

But other times, the chaplain's job is to deliver much worse news, and to stand as a witness to inconsolable grief.

“On an ordinary weekday morning, a young woman named Christina, left her dorm room at St. Mary’s College in Waterford, Maine. She was planning to drive to Portland for a dental appointment and then to meet her mother for lunch. A man was waiting in the parking lot – not for her, particularly, but for any one of the two thousand or so female undergraduates that might have appeared at that time and place. He forced Christina into her vehicle, made her drive him to a remote area, then dragged her into the woods, raped her, tortured her, and took her life.”

Kate Braestrup ministered to the warden that found Christina’s body, as she also ministered to the warden who pulled a child out from under the ice on a lake whose surface could not hold her weight, and whose waters were too cold for her to survive. And Kate waited with the elderly woman whose husband went missing after he took his snowmobile out to go ice fishing.

Did God have anything to do with the little girl getting lost in the woods, and then found? Did God have anything to do with the young college woman who was raped and murdered? Did God have anything to do with the old man who went out on his snowmobile for a ride on a winter lake and didn’t return?

I would venture to say no. Yet somehow we want to make meaning out of these and other tragic events. Concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl wrote that “suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning.”

Job, you may recall, is that pious and upright character in the bible, who, after suffering the death of his children and the destruction of his worldly possessions, is covered with sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. He sits in the ashes, scraping his sores with a piece of broken pottery, cursing the day he was born.

Job’s wife, who would like to see an end to his suffering, tells him to curse God and die. But Job answers, “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”

All the world’s religions must grapple with the good and the bad existing alongside each other. Hindus embrace the truth that life gives us both the good and the bad when they worship the god Shiva, who both creates and destroys. Through the Koran, Islam teaches there is nothing that is not from God – birth and death, joy and suffering, our sweetest singing and our cries of agony, all of it is from God.

Christians believe that suffering can be redemptive, that Jesus died for our sins. The first of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths states that to be human is to suffer. Humanism claims that suffering is caused by random events and human free will.

How can bad things happen to good people? Because bad things happen to everyone. Our task is to respond to suffering, both our own and others’, in a way that accords with our beliefs, and does not cause more suffering in its wake. For example, does it console or cause more suffering to tell a parent who has just lost their child, that this is part of God’s plan?

Liberal religious people, even if we are not theists, must come to terms with pain and loss and find a way to affirm that life is worth living. The pertinent question for religious liberals like us, is *not* why do bad things happen, but what can I do about it? How will I respond?

Kate Braestrup writes, "It doesn't matter how educated, moneyed, or smart you are: when your child's footprints end at the river's edge, when the one you love has gone into the woods with a bleak outlook and a loaded gun, when the chaplain is walking toward you with bad news in her mouth, then only the cliches are true, and you will repeat them, unashamed.

"Your life, too, will swing suddenly and cruelly in a new direction with breathtaking speed, and if you are really wise, you will know enough to look around for love. It will be there, standing right on the hinge, holding out its arms to you. If you are wise, whoever you are, you will let go, fall against that love, and be held."

I'm sorry to say that I can't solve the problem of theodicy for us today. But I can tell you that I believe in the power of human beings to redeem suffering and find a way to affirm that although life is unfair, it is good, in spite of everything.

I recommend, in the face of suffering, that we look for the love, *be* the love for each other, because we need one another. We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted, when we are in trouble and afraid, when we are in despair, or joy or defeat. All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

So let us be ready when we are needed. Let us be ready.

REFERENCES:

Here If You Need Me, Kate Braestrup, 2007.
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