

When Life Takes The Wrong Turn
By Rev. Don Southworth
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READING: From *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Rabbi Harold Kushner

There is only one question which really matters: why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting; somewhat like doing the crossword puzzle in the Sunday paper and feeling very satisfied when you made the words fit; but ultimately without the capacity to reach people where they really care. Virtually every meaningful conversation I have ever had with people on the subject of God and religion has either started with this question, or gotten around to it before long. Not only the troubled man or woman who has just come from a discouraging diagnosis at the doctor's office, but the college student who tells me that he has decided there is no God, or the total stranger who comes up to me at a party just when I am ready to ask the hostess for my coat, and she says, "I hear you're a rabbi; how can you believe that..." – they all have one thing in common. They are all troubled by the unfair distribution of suffering in the world.

The misfortunes of good people are not only a problem to the people who suffer and to their families. They are a problem to everyone who wants to believe in a just and fair and livable world. They inevitably raise questions about the goodness, the kindness, even the existence of God.

SERMON:

One of the greatest technological innovations of the last few years is the driving directions we can get over the Internet now instantaneously. For a man like me who suffers from an inability to ask for directions when he is lost, having a print out that gives me the exact mileage and where to turn, has been a true Godsend. My wife Kathleen and I rarely fight in the car anymore – at least not over my getting lost – and I don't have to waste minutes or hours pretending like I know where I am going or swallowing my pride and embarrassingly asking for directions like I once did. Yahoo and Mapquest have done wonders for many relationships and generations of children might grow up not ever having to listen to grown ups yell at each other over making a wrong turn.

If only the road maps of our lives could be known and followed so easily.

No matter how well we plan and hope and dream, life has a way of taking the wrong turn from time to time. The marriage that was supposed to last forever ends prematurely. The mother who was supposed to live until she was 80, dies when she is 40. We have to bury the child who was supposed to be burying us one day. The job that was the one we were going to retire from, becomes the victim of a bad economy and

we are staring at bankruptcy in our 50's. Infertility robs us of the biological children we always knew we'd have. Drugs or mental illness take away the life we hoped and planned on for our children.

The list of the unexpected turns, the unexpected suffering that life sometimes brings is endless. This morning I invite you to reflect with me on what we can do when life takes a wrong turn; a turn we did not expect and definitely did not want. The turns in life that all of us have faced before, some of us are facing now and all of us will face again. Turns that destroy some people while strengthening others.

I learned about the unexpected turns life takes early in life. I thought with my six year old mind that mommies and daddies were supposed to stay together forever and ever. When I turned seven I found out it wasn't true and mommies and daddies sometimes break up. I will never forget the Valentine's Day when my dad visited us and brought candy for my sister and me. We never ate that candy because my mom or my dad, I can't remember which, threw the candy against the wall when they were having a fight. The next day my grandmother picked us up from school because my mom had attempted suicide and would be in the hospital for the next three months. I went to live with my grandparents while my sister went to live with my aunt and uncle until my mom got well. No mommy, no daddy, no sister. Life was not going according to the roadmap I learned from watching *Leave it To Beaver* on television.

When I was seven years old I did not know who Rabbi Harold Kushner was. He did not write *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* until 1981 after his son, Aaron, died from progeria, rapid aging, at the age of 14 in 1977. I wouldn't have understood much, if anything, from his book but I would have known, at some deep, maybe unconscious level the truth of one sentence he wrote: "Pain is the price for being alive."

Pain is the price for being alive. When our lives are going the way we hope and plan, when our relationships and careers are thriving, when our children are turning out even better than we ever hoped, when everything we touch turns to gold, we may not think of, let alone agree with those words.

But during those times when we feel like we are living in a cave with no light or no hope, when our families are falling apart and our job is being downsized, when our kids are doing drugs and dropping out of school, when our bodies are breaking down and people we love are dying too soon, in those times pain seems to be the only price for being alive – and we may not be willing to pay it anymore.

What do we do when life seems to be falling apart and we cannot find the light of hope? When we wonder why it is happening to us and ask what we did to deserve it?

As Rabbi Kushner's words from our reading this morning remind us, the misfortunes of good people are not only a problem to those who are suffering, they are a problem to everyone who wants to believe that life is just and fair.

When we are in the throes of the pain and suffering caused by life's unexpected and unwanted turns, our friends, our family, maybe even us, will try to find the meaning in the suffering. We hear things like it was God's will or if it doesn't kill us it makes us stronger. Some religions and some religious leaders offer

these words to comfort people when they are in pain and suggest that there is a master plan for life.

Forrest Church, the minister of All Souls church in New York City, debunked this form of religious faith when he wrote, “Theologians jump through flaming hoops to “justify the ways of God”, and many philosophers do the same; rationalizing human affliction as a means to some higher end. According to those who believe life must make sense for it to be meaningful, evil and suffering can be rationalized by anyone who truly understands the nature of the cosmos...Try this reasoning on the victim of a drunken driver. Or an elderly woman who invests her life savings in a con man’s personal account.”

Instead of attempting to make all suffering in life have a greater and deeper meaning, I prefer to follow the Buddha’s teaching when it comes to suffering as he outlined in the First Noble Truth of Buddhism. The first noble truth is that “life is suffering”. To live is to suffer. Not all the time, maybe not even most of the time, but to be alive is to experience suffering, to experience pain. As Rabbi Kushner said, pain is the price for life.

But knowing that pain and suffering is part of life intellectually is not enough when life punches us in the gut or rips our heart out. At those times we need something more, we need something or someone we can hang onto. I offer four possibilities this morning for dealing with life, for hanging on, when the horrors, the tragedies, the suffering becomes too great.

The first is to feel the pain before we start looking for meaning. In a society that is as pain adverse as we are this may be the hardest thing to do. Some of us pretend that everything is okay even when our life is falling apart around us. We do our best to have a stiff upper lip or we at least pretend to. Sometimes the hardest part of going through the pain and suffering of life is to actually feel and acknowledge that we are suffering and in pain. How many of us have consciously or unconsciously chosen to numb our pain with alcohol, drugs, relationships, sex, television, gambling, food or busy-ness. If we are to get through the hard times of life we must face and deal with the pain. We don’t have to do it alone but we have to feel it – or we can become one of those people who look back with bitterness and resentment at life because we got such a bad deal.

My colleague Lynn Ungar writes about how the pain feels when we are in the midst of it: “I keep reminding myself that one day I will turn all this pain into something useful. Like the myth about dinosaurs turning into oil over the eons, one day heat and pressure will turn this suffering into poetry or human understanding or something. But for now there’s just this big, ugly, dinosaur trampling and chewing, and I can only hope that there will be something left of me when it’s done.”

I don’t know anybody who enjoys the feelings that come when the dinosaur named pain starts trampling through our lives. That is why we need to talk to someone about it. Studies show that the second most likely time a person is going to come to a religious community is when something bad happens in his or her life. Why? Because when life takes a wrong turn and we are suffering our natural, human instinct is to be with other people. This is true when people are facing divorce, or death or disaster. This was true after

September 11 when attendance at churches, synagogues and mosques increased substantially, and it was true last Sunday, especially in Blacksburg, Virginia.

When bad things happen to us we need to tell our stories to other people. Those people can be friends or family, they can be ministers or therapists, they can be people who have been through what we are going through. We need to talk and share with other people not only because it will make us feel better but because it invites others to feel better by listening to and supporting us.

In 1994 when Kathleen was diagnosed with breast cancer – a big wrong turn in our life - we were not actively participating in any religious community. But we were part of a home schooling group. Not only did that community bring us food for one month while Kathleen received radiation treatment, they listened to her story and recommended support groups we could attend. We talked to friends and family, counselors and doctors. For a couple of months we were obsessed with fighting cancer and we talked about it to everyone we could. We were overwhelmed by the support we received and I know now that people felt better because they were able to help us.

That is why it is so important we talk to others when we are suffering the pain that comes with the unexpected turns of life – especially in our religious community. The people who are not able to talk to others deprive not only themselves of having the chance to heal, or at least cope better with their pain, they deprive others the chance to love and care for them. A Hasidic rabbi once said, “human beings are God’s language”. A friend of mine says she sometimes just needs “God with skin on”. Other people not only know the suffering that comes with life, they often know what we need the most. Not advice or lectures but simply a listening ear. The advice and counsel may come in time but when we are in the middle of hard times what we need most is someone to listen to us and show us that they care.

But sometimes as much as we need and want people they are not enough. We need something more than people, we need faith. Whether it is faith in God, faith in life, faith in love, faith in ourselves, faith that there is a reason for everything or faith that everything is a random accident, when life slaps us around and doesn’t turn out like we want it to, we are invited, we are challenged to have faith. Sometimes people lose their faith when tragedy and heartache come, sometimes people’s faith gets stronger; almost always, faith changes.

I’ll never forget the worst, and best, week I experienced when I did my Clinical Pastoral Education as a hospital chaplain. In seven days time I sat with a woman in her 40’s who had her leg amputated due to diabetes and cancer, I counseled a woman who suffered critical injuries from an automobile accident and was separated from her two children who were also seriously injured, and I watched a beautiful 15 year old girl get released from the hospital after recovering from pneumonia and I watched her return five days later dead on arrival due to a brain aneurism.

I cried and prayed and wondered why life can be so cruel. And I had to be a chaplain.

The woman who was in the car accident and I spoke often and frequently prayed together. One day after she knew she would recover and her kids were getting better she asked me if I thought God had made the

accident happen. I did my best to be the good chaplain and avoid giving my answer and instead asked her what *she* thought, but she was too wise to let me get off the hook that easy. I eventually told her no, I didn't think God made her crash and God didn't make the 14 year old girl die or the woman have her leg amputated. I told her that I believed God doesn't show up as the cause of our troubles, God, or that which is our best selves and love, is an option we have to survive our troubles.

I had seen God in the tears and love of the 20 friends that came to the hospital the night the 15 year-old cheerleader had died. They sobbed and yelled, gave each other hugs, held hands, told stories and sang songs deep into the night. I saw God in the way the woman's family gathered in her room the morning of the amputation and told stories and jokes about what life with one leg would be like and I saw God in the way the young woman from the car crash began to work on changing her life so she would never live the fast life that she believed caused her car crash again.

One of our biggest challenges as Unitarian Universalists is doing the hard, spiritual work of developing a faith that will sustain us when life is difficult. This can be tough because we do not have creeds to guide us, we do not share the same theologies or stories about life, death and pain to comfort us.

Our faith – whether it is in God, or each other, in the cycle and seasons of life or a little bit of everything – can help us make it through the hard times. Sometimes those hard times teach us lessons that we can use in our life, sometimes those hard times don't teach us anything, they just cause us pain. As Rabbi Kushner writes near the end of his book, "I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron's life and death than I would have ever been without it. And I would give up all those gains in a second if I could have my son back! If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others – and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose."

Friends, none of us can choose the turns that life takes. When those turns are hard and harrowing, oh how I wish we could. But we can't. All we can do is choose how we respond to those turns. The question we must ask is not, why do bad things happen to good people, but instead, now that this has happened to me what am I going to do about it.

When I talk to people who have survived the nasty turns of life they tell me that facing the pain, being with other people and cultivating their faith were the three main ways they got through the tough times. Many of them say they also feel compelled to help other people by sharing their experiences with them. This is why millions of people attend support groups – not only to get the support of others but because it feels good to share our stories of survival with others who are in the midst of the pain and suffering we once were.

We may learn great lessons from the suffering life brings or there may be no lessons to be learned at all. But feeling our pain, turning to others, cultivating faith and then helping others by telling our stories can get us through the hard times and help others in the process.

May we feel the pain and suffering life brings and not run away. May we face the pain and suffering of life together and not alone. May we cultivate a faith that gives us the strength and courage to hold on in the midst of our suffering. And may we remember to offer our hands, our hearts and our stories to those walking through the valleys of life that we have walked in before.

May it be so. Amen.

CLOSING WORDS: by Wayne Arnason

Take courage friends

The way is often hard, the path is never clear and the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down there is another truth – you are not alone.