

# **‘Why must we suffer? A psychiatrist reflects’**

Dr. Andrew Powell

## **Introduction**

Philosophers and theologians have argued about the nature of suffering since the dawn of civilisation, but I dare say humankind is not much wiser today than it was in the time of Lao Tse, or the Buddha, or Plato, or Jesus Christ, or the Prophet Muhammad; for suffering and life are born hand in hand.

Being a doctor has brought me into contact with a good deal of suffering, both physical and emotional, and so I would like to offer some thoughts about the nature of suffering, the challenge it presents, and how to try to work with suffering, to relieve despair and bring hope.

## **What is suffering?**

First, I had better define what I mean by the word. I am drawing a distinction between pain and suffering in that pain is a sensation, while suffering means to be aware of what pain signifies. It is therefore a function of mind.

Suffering arises when we learn the meaning of loss – for instance, to live with the prospect of chronic pain or disability, or to have to face the ending of life, your own or that of others.

The list is a long one. At the heart of it is that once we have grasped that birth brings with it the inevitability of death, the desire to be well carries with it, consciously or not, the fear of illness and the realisation that happiness, as far as it depends on health, is at best ephemeral. Less visibly, there is the suffering of oppression, alienation and loneliness, and the sorrow of love lost, that once was so naively assumed.

This poignant truth is recounted in the myth of Adam and Eve, exiled from the Garden of Eden because of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Their fate was to live ever after with a yearning for the paradise they could never regain. Yet expulsion into the world of birth, ageing, sickness and death also entailed growing from Homo innocens to Homo sapiens.

The theme of loss informs all great art and literature. These days it also plays an important part in our understanding of mental health and so I first want to consider how the pain of loss shapes the future of every human child.

## **The ordeal of birth**

To start at the beginning: before birth, we now know the baby is actively responding to the environment of the womb. There is plenty going on - the baby is testing out the limits of its world, kicking, sucking its thumb, listening and busy getting on with growing. Amniotic fluid cushions the baby from impact, life is one long feed and there is warmth and the comfort of the mother's heartbeat.

There are occasional disturbances to the well-being of the foetus - the highly anxious mother whose adrenaline is flooding the baby's circulation, or conflict in the outer world, when the baby hears raised voices and angry exchanges, or should the mother fall ill. Despite this, most babies reach full-term in a reasonably tranquil state.

Then comes the trauma of birth, which leaves indelible traces in the psyche of the infant. The comfort of the womb is exchanged for almost heart-stopping compression, as the birth process gets under way.

Paediatricians refer to foetal distress when the oxygen supply to the baby is seriously compromised, but every baby passes through a rite of passage in which the forces of life and death are pitted one against the other. The terror of suffocation is only assuaged when the newly born is held in the arms of the mother, feeling the softness of her skin, taking in her smell and tasting the sweetness of her milk.

### **First encounters with loss**

Nature has infinite wisdom in how things should be arranged, provided we do not mess it up with dogmatic and largely fashionable opinions as to what is 'good for the child'. In the 1940s, a fanatical paediatrician called Truby King urged mothers never to go to their babies except for the four-hourly feed, to teach the baby 'independence' and thereby caused untold suffering to thousands of babies, some of whom carry the imprint of that deprivation to this day.

All severe privations of childhood leave their mark and an infant can only respond to overwhelming loss in one of three ways - to take refuge in withdrawal, to become clinging, or to learn to survive without any attachments, which leads to psychopathic behaviour in later life.

In contrast, the child with a healthy and confident attachment to its mother can risk losing her for a time, not least out of sheer curiosity to explore the world, which may be a matter of just going into the next-door room. When something frightening happens, real or imagined, the child runs back to the safety of its mother. Similarly, the loss of the comfort of breast milk is more than compensated for by the excitement of tasting different foods. Childhood at its best is a great adventure, in which the child plays the hero protagonist of the drama. This confidence and security is the greatest gift that parents can give a child.

Then comes the challenge of the wider social world. Every young person will feel frightened at times - the fight/ flight response is built into all of us, and where there is a serious risk to our safety, emotional as much as physical, the barriers go up to keep out the perceived threat. We all have ego-defences in place; but this is only to be expected, and not to be confused with the extreme hypersensitivity that results from emotional insecurity.

The first day at school is etched into most people's memories. The child is no longer the epicentre of the social world. This big loss can be managed if kindly teachers step in to help, there are friends to be made and the lessons are fun. Then the child goes home with pride in a new accomplishment. Unfortunately, it is not always such a happy occasion and school phobia is a major problem for child psychiatry services.

I am focussing on how losing what we count as safe and familiar is built into the blueprint of life and how, in the right measure, it can be the spur to

growth. It holds true whether for that first day at school, or the young adult brave enough to fall in love and run the risk of being jilted, or when facing a life-threatening illness, or for the person whose career falls apart but who manages to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

### **The neurophysiology of emotion**

The mind is not reducible to the brain, but it certainly cannot do without it. Take the fight-flight response mentioned earlier. When a threat is perceived, the brain tells the adrenal glands to release adrenaline in preparation for fight or flight; this is accompanied by the emotions of anxiety and fear. (In fact, an injection of adrenaline will have the same result.) Importantly, the fear may equally be triggered by what is imagined, so that an insecure child, for example, cannot tolerate the absence of its mother without becoming anxious because of its fantasy of abandonment. On the other hand, circulating endorphins, which are opioid peptides produced by the pituitary gland and hypothalamus in the brain, induce an immediate feeling of well-being. Nature makes us this gift in the first few hours of life, for endorphins reach peak levels in the mother's bloodstream during labour and are imbibed by the baby in its first feed, enormously facilitating the bonding between them.

The nerve centre for emotion is located in the specialised neural structure in the white matter of the brain called the limbic system, which mediates the basic emotions common to all mammals. For example, removal of its amygdala nucleus leads to passivity while over-activity (as may occur in epilepsy) can cause aggression.

However, the brain has further developed during the more recent evolutionary history of the primates and the limbic system is now buried deep beneath the neocortex, or grey matter. In the case of the human being, the neocortex has massively expanded to form the frontal lobes, the seat of reason and empathy.

The problem for humankind lies in the way the limbic system and the neocortex function largely independently, and not infrequently are at odds. This evolutionary quirk endangers the future of the humanity, depending on how we manage it. In the case of the well-functioning human ego, reason and emotion are able to work together, and they serve us faithfully, enabling us to love, to bond and, through facing the many challenges of emotional conflict, to grow in maturity. However, when the same biological legacy results in our being ruled by our emotions, they become ruthless tyrants, dedicated to destroying anyone or anything felt to be a threat to self-survival. Before the advent of modern technology, this served well enough to protect tribal and national identities but coupled with science, the result has been disastrous. Over 100 million people were killed in war during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than in all the previous history of humankind.

### **Life without soul**

'Mind, body and spirit' is something of a mantra for our time and I now want to put the spotlight on spirit. Much of the suffering we see today is because of its denial in a post-modern secular world. It follows that treating disturbances of mind and body without reference to spirit is deeply misguided.

I am going to use the word soul to mean the unique spiritual core of every human being. This does not necessarily imply the survival of

consciousness after bodily death, as atheists and humanists will avow. Just as water finds its own level, people incline to their own deepest level of meaning, and if their existential concerns can be comprehended within the compass and purpose of a single lifespan, well and good.

In the West, there has been an intellectual schism between materialist science and metaphysics that has widened over three hundred years. The dominant worldview of 20th century has been that of a fortuitous, mechanical universe. Karl Marx called religion 'the opium of the masses' and Sigmund Freud described it variously as 'a universal obsessional ritual, a reaction to infantile helplessness and a mass delusion.' Despite such pronouncements, surveys have shown that well over two thirds of the population continue to believe in God or a 'higher being', many of whom have a steadfast belief that the indestructible essence of soul transcends the temporal bounds of birth and death. However, for people who do not belong to a faith tradition, concern with spiritual values and beliefs frequently may only surface when faced by a crisis such as major illness.

### **The existential void**

Despite the distractions of consumerism, many people are left deeply puzzled about the purpose of life. For those that have children, there is the hope that the love shown them will bear fruit in the course of their lives ahead. No less important is the value of friendship and community, while for others there is the wish that one's work will contribute in some small way to the progress of humankind.

However, when mental distress reaches a certain pitch, none of these expectations can entirely sustain a person. Worse still, the crisis may follow on the failure to make a success of one's work, or arise when a family is breaking up. What then is left that is worth living for?

The life instinct is the foundation of the human ego and it is a powerful force. Small surprise, then, that many psychiatrists regard suicidal thinking as pathognomonic of depression, for the diagnosis purports to explain the existential anguish that drives a person to ask, 'what is the point in going on any longer?' and to announce, 'I am a failure. There is nothing left for me. I cannot feel love. I have lost my faith. There is no light, only darkness'.

In the face of such overwhelming misery, mental health professionals are liable to distance themselves from the suffering that is being communicated. This is understandable, but it will not be much help to someone needing to explore his or her resources when facing what may yet turn out to be a psycho-spiritual emergency.

To avoid misdiagnosing depressive illness, openness, empathy and genuine interest coupled with a wide spiritual frame of reference, are called for. Unlike the general population, less than one third of psychiatrists hold a spiritual or religious outlook. Most subscribe to a physicalist worldview, and this can make it harder to relate to a patient for whom the spiritual dimension is important. However, all that is required is that the psychiatrist values and supports that spiritual enquiry. It does not mean having to provide answers. It does mean showing a willingness to follow the patient to where he or she is most likely to find the answer, by asking it of his or her own soul. Importantly, the psychiatrist can help during this time simply by keeping faith with the ultimate goodness of the universe when it may feel lost to the patient.

## **Hell or Heaven**

I indicated earlier that no sooner than the developing ego is celebrating its mastery over life, it is faced with intimations of its own decline. Pain, unforeseen injury, the realisation that relationships cannot be forced, disappointments in love, the loss of loved ones, and the certain knowledge of ones own ageing and eventual death, compel us to relinquish the cherished dreams of yesterday in favour of the stark truth that we do not, and cannot have, control over much of what happens to us. From the perspective of ego, it would seem that from a perfect beginning, we are destined for a miserable end.

Everyone wants to be happy, but happiness is not a right, neither is it something that can be bought or borrowed. If our ego defences could give way gracefully to the inevitability of material and personal loss, we could be consoled in the knowledge of the greater gain – to have contributed to life, the welfare of others and to have advanced one's soul a little along the way. Although our intellects may see the truth in this, the limbic brain will have none of it. Reason and emotion are at odds here and the greater the neurosis, the more they battle it out, for where love is lacking and the emotions are unchecked, the world will be experienced as a hostile and dangerous place. The resulting behaviour is fear-driven, leading to envy, jealousy and rivalry, along with all the negative attributes of the ego - arrogance, ruthlessness, and manipulation.

How different for someone who has the good fortune to be raised in a loving home! The self, feeling itself loved, has love to give. To 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39) then comes naturally, for giving to another means also to give to oneself. This happiness, which comes of giving help, whether to individuals, communities or causes, entails a paradox attested by Jesus in the Gospels. 'For he that has, to him shall be given; and he that has not, from him shall be taken, even that which he has.' (Mark 4:25)

Such a statement is counter-intuitive. Are not those with the greatest need the most deserving? Yet, when we look at the misery wrought by neurosis, we find that the failure of relationships usually stems from the desire to obtain from the other what feels to be lacking in the self. Once the honeymoon is over the battle begins, for no one wants their energy and their love drained out of them in order to fill the void in the other.

From the psychiatric point of view, here lies the rub. Because it is hard for people who have been seriously abused, deprived or otherwise traumatised to feel much love for themselves, consequently neither can they easily love anyone else. What is called love is in fact need, which is not about giving but taking.

The egotistical behaviour that arises comes from a lack of healthy ego development. Insecurity and poor self-esteem, not infrequently coupled with compensatory self-inflation (narcissism) actually point to this underlying deficit. When there is no trust in the goodness of self or other, life becomes an obstacle course to get through by resorting to manipulation.

## **The future in our hands**

There has been much confusion about the meaning and purpose of the ego. Just as a knife can cut bread or kill, so the ego can be an instrument of

creation or destruction. The difference is between fixed defensive patterns of behaviour based on fear and being open to new experiences based on trust. Concerning this, the future of the human species probably lies in the balance. We have an evolutionary history of tribalism rooted in the fight/flight mentality of the ego under threat, just as we see to this day in the behaviour of every insecure and unhappy child. In contrast, secure, happy children show something very different – the capacity to grow into adults who value not competition but co-operation.

Co-operation is a sure sign of spirituality in action. There is an old story that compares Heaven and Hell. In Hell, lost souls are seated around a large dish of appetising food. They are obliged to use spoons with handles longer than their arms but since no one can get their spoon to their mouth, they are all starving. In Heaven, they must use the same spoons, but instead everyone sets about feeding each other.

### **Spirituality, East and West**

A commonly held assumption is that spirituality necessitates a suppression of the ego. In my view, this frequently brings about more suffering, since the ego constantly fights back. The skill is rather in finding a way to liberate the self from the ego's negative and limiting aspects.

Different religions go about this in different ways. For example, Buddhists regard desire and attachment as the principle cause of suffering and that ending desire, which leads naturally to letting go of attachment, will end suffering. Compare this with the Christian tradition, in which the accent is on redemption. Suffering is seen to be a necessary spiritual challenge and a profound test of faith, as illustrated by Job. The most extreme challenge, the 'dark night of the soul', is to feel abandoned by God. Jesus cried out on the cross, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani', 'Lord, Lord, Why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46).

Although I was brought up in the Anglican Church, I have been influenced by the spiritual traditions of both East and West. Personally, I like to picture the influence of soul on the ego on the lines of a good parent dealing with a wayward child. As the ego becomes infused with soul virtues, its agitation subsides, it becomes more peaceful and its energy can be put to good purpose; but such a child needs understanding, loving and forgiving.

It is no coincidence that the study of mental disorder flourished in the West, for since the Renaissance, we have been fascinated by the complexity of the individual psyche. In the East, there is a more pragmatic tradition, one of setting aside the burdensome contents of the psyche while aiming to purify the heart through meditation. This has led to important East-West cultural differences towards the negative, or shadow, aspect of the self.

Buddhists and Hindus concentrate on right conduct and the development of wisdom that will influence successive incarnations according to the law of karma. Daoists hold that there is no such thing in itself as badness, only the manifestation of the imbalance of *yin* and *yang*, and that harmony arises spontaneously when the rhythms of Nature are truly understood and respected.

In the West, neither karma nor the rhythms of Nature cut much ice. Instead we struggle with our inner demons, hoping to overcome them psychotherapeutically through bringing the shadow to consciousness or, if we

are Christian, by means of repentance, as told in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32). Muslims, too, set great store by the virtue of repentance. The Koran states that repentance is the most noble and beloved form of obedience in the eyes of Allah.

### **Individual and collective suffering**

In the title of my talk, I ask why we have to suffer. This is a very western kind of question since it implies that there is an answer, rather than suffering simply being an unpleasant fact. Yet from the transpersonal perspective, it is a worthwhile line of enquiry since it is held that the soul always incarnates with an agenda perfectly attuned to its chosen circumstances.

People with mental health problems are certainly among those who have taken on lives of great suffering. Nevertheless, it is my belief that every soul has an intimation of the journey ahead, the challenges that will occur, the knowledge to be gained and the lessons to be learned. At the same time, all this is subject to our free will, so we remain instruments of our own spiritual destiny.

It may seem callous to suggest that one person's suffering might be in the service of helping others awaken to the qualities of caring and concern, let alone make reparation on their behalf. It has been said that in willingly submitting to torture and execution, Jesus offered to awaken the conscience of the world. This highlights the ambiguous status of psychiatry, for had Pontius Pilate been in the position to order a psychiatric examination, imagine what may have followed – instead of a crucifixion, Section 2 of the Mental Health Act! Further, before we dismiss Judas Iscariot as a thoroughly bad character, we must remember that without him, the law of the prophets could not have been fulfilled. Is it right to condemn him? Possibly, he was entrusted with the most difficult task of all the disciples.

Indeed, the transpersonal view holds that there is no such thing as a bad experience. From the soul perspective, a lifetime passes as quickly as we might account for one day in a single year; yet the task is the same - to deepen our understanding of life and, especially in the face of adversity, grow a bigger heart.

Though karma may be rooted in the behaviour of individual souls, collective karma is no less important. Genocide can never be excused, but it happens, like everything else, for a purpose. The Jewish Holocaust raised the conscience of the world by several degrees. Yet, tragically, there has been continuing genocide since that time in Biafra, Uganda, Cambodia, Rwanda, the Balkans and Iraq. How bad does it have to get before we learn to break the cycle of persecution?

There is only one way the cycle can only be broken - by forgiveness. This is something beyond the power of the human ego to conceive, but not the soul.

### **Why should we forgive?**

People who have suffered profoundly are faced with the need to find forgiveness, whether of God for his allowing it, or the Devil for doing it, or humankind for carrying it out, and this is just about the hardest thing in the world to do. Yet, without forgiveness, anger will have a deeply corrosive effect

on a person's life. Far from being able to let go, that person remains trapped in hurt and bitterness, which can last a lifetime and more.

This is the pivotal point of human development that confronts both the individual and the whole world community. How can we use the many and deep wounds of life to help raise the consciousness of our world to a higher level?

The workings of the limbic brain make sure we live in a state of high emotional reactivity. This is all to the good, otherwise we would learn nothing in the classroom of life. And yet, because the ego is dedicated to its self-protection, and knows no other life or world than this one, death is its ultimate adversary, and one that eventually must win.

Much psychotherapy is concerned with helping people haunted by death anxiety in its many symptomatic guises. In contrast, psycho-spiritual therapy invites the soul to speak, and it tells a different story. Since the soul transcends the body, it does not know death, and can therefore view the comings and going of life with absolute serenity. It is in the original nature of soul to want nothing more than for the incarnated self to outgrow the narrow concerns of the ego and become conscious of the beauty and unity of life. From this quiet resting place within, we can observe ourselves being tossed around by the drama of life with a kindly and loving eye, much as we would watch the antics of a child. The intended lessons are plain to see in the here-and-now; there is no need to wait for Kingdom Come.

I am not claiming any special knowledge of the ways of soul. All rivers lead to the sea and I am simply speaking about the one I know best as a psychiatrist. It is a river of tears, shed in anger, shed in sorrow and shed in despair. It is, in places, a raging torrent. Yet, when someone comes through such an ordeal, there is pride in having faced one's worst fears and found new strength - breakdown leads to breakthrough.

To stay well means to find wholeness, in other words healing, or else one falls into the same river all over again. The ego is indifferent to healing, since it is more occupied with ambition and success. Healing, on the other hand, is the soul's greatest desire. In a world driven by the human ego, every human being inflicts and receives pain. Yet throughout the whole turbulent business of growing up, the soul is flexing its muscle, in small ways at first, showing kindness, the expression of sympathy, concern for others and charitable acts. All this is premonitory to an occasion that, eventually, will challenge every person to his or her core, and which calls on the soul to give of its very best.

This occasion is invariably one that deeply tests a person's capacity to forgive. It means finding love for those that have badly hurt you. A recent book by Immaculee Ilibagiza,\* whose family were slaughtered in the Rwandan Holocaust, is an inspiring account. In the midst of her terrible grief, she came to recognise through prayer that even the killer of her family was God's child as much as she, and face to face she was able to forgive him.

Forgiveness is the supreme test of love. Jesus spelled it out like this: 'Love your enemies, bless those that curse you, do good to those that hate you, and pray for those who treat you badly and persecute you, so that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven' (Matthew 5:20). Just as the symbol of transformation, the lotus, cannot flower without its roots in the

mud, the burgeoning soul finds an opportunity for forgiveness in every hurt given and received.

Desirable though it may be, a person cannot always bring himself or herself to forgive, and it is not for anyone to try to insist. What I have generally found, though, is that a person would wish to be able to forgive, if it only felt possible. This is because despite the outrage of the ego, the soul impulse cannot be killed off. Once we make contact with even the wish to forgive, we are starting out on a journey of love in which we too can be forgiven, find redemption and, at last, return to where each of us began - the Garden of Eden; no longer a place of innocence but wisdom.

\* Ilibagiza, I (2006) *Left to Tell* Hay House Inc: Carlsbad CA

Dr. Andrew Powell's publications on Spirituality and Mental Health can be downloaded from the publication archive of the Website of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists UK, see: [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/spirit](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/spirit)

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