

# On Enduring Pain

By Andy Leon, BSN, MS, CH

For as long as man has been recording his thoughts and experiences, pain has been considered a punishment often inflicted by God in retribution for some known or unknown cause. So, it has become an easy thing to think that anytime we get hurt; emotionally or physically, it is because of some secret or public offense. Our justice system and many of the codes of religions judge pain, discomfort and isolation/abandonment as retribution for earlier offenses or crimes. But what happens when there really is no previous crime or offense against anyone? What do we say when we watch a severely ill infant screaming for peace because an internal illness is in process? What do we say about the schoolchildren killed by mass shooters on a rampage? We can think of many instances where pain plays its role, and no one can find the causal moment or event. Is it possible that there are other reasons for living creatures, even people, to experience pain for positive reasons?

In some tribal cultures the experience and tolerance of pain was considered part of the training for adulthood, especially among males, to learn to sustain the experience of pain without crying out. Even torture could be withstood without a cry or a tear with enough training. Possibly, the reason had to do with survival. To cry out when one is wounded is to attract attention. To do that in a hostile environment is to lower one's chance of survival and return to the tribe without discovery by the enemy. We once had a dog who sustained a fractured hip and crawled under a bush until she was discovered and rescued by a friendly neighbor. Even after coming home to heal, the dog never made a whimper, except if she was moved. This leads one to wonder if the animals in the wild hold a different view of their relationship with pain. What if Pain is really one of our natural allies, a gift to help us heal better and faster?

In hypnosis, I have often suggested to hypnotized clients preparing for surgery, that they can visit with Pain and engage in negotiations and discussions on the role of Pain in their healing process. Invariably, Pain makes the complaint that it is not readily listened to when it seeks the attention of its host/employer. It will say that it tries to be discrete and whisper softly to get its message out but is too often, ignored. So, it must raise its voice and sharpen its inflection in order to be better understood, and finally, it must shout, loudly and obnoxiously to command attention. With every increase in volume of Pain's voice, the experience of pain must escalate because the subject is doing something that provokes the experience of discomfort. Pain's real message is for the subject to stop the action or change the posture for a little while. The amount and level of rest, of course, is dictated by the severity of the discomfort. Sometimes, one will only need a few seconds to take a deep, relaxing breath, and other times may require some bed rest. With rest will come relief and healing processes will be enhanced.

Let's return for a moment, to the idea of pain as being a punishment from some deity. Human beings in many religions, attribute exquisite wisdom to God or whatever name they wish to give the holder of the highest power. If we believe in that wisdom and that mere humans are not capable of comprehending the intricate scale of God's wisdom, then we should feel reassured that there is no coincidence in the universe. Every particle of matter, no matter in what form, has

a purpose, and matter comes in myriad forms. Just note the discoveries in the last hundred years of smaller and smaller particles of matter and the incredible energies that they are sometimes capable of releasing. Even the “emptiness” of Space is revealing that it is full of many phenomena that we cannot yet understand fully. Why would we expect to understand the mind of the Creator of all that exists in the universe that we are a part of? We, too, must have a purpose. Everyone, born, and not yet born, becomes a part of the universe, despite its apparent insignificant size or the length of life it will have. Every event, therefore, has a purpose or group of purposes and they may not be evident on discovery. Remember that the Hubble Telescope was once aimed at a place in Space that showed no light or activity. After a time- exposure was made, the high-resolution lenses identified endless systems of new and dying stars and galaxies, so many light years away that man will be a long time before he can hope to travel there to look around. So, is it any wonder that the real story of Pain, our companion in life, still has so many things to teach us?

When good people (and most of us are.) find themselves experiencing pain, what seems to first be noted is the loss of control over one’s health. Next is the loss of control over our ability to direct our lives in an orderly way. We live by artificial measures of time and artificial rules of behavior and decorum. It is how we can think of what “normal” is. But we often forget that we did not create the world and universe in which we live. We are visitors; tenants; traveling guests. We are not the drivers or navigators in control of this Earth we are on. We have learned much in the short million or so years we have existed as a human race but keep in mind that the universe and even our little planet are considerably older, and much was going on before we humans arrived.

Is it possible that this master power that has created this apparently, growing universe, is capable of thinking about events in the present and seeing the outcomes very far in the future? “If this happens today, what change may come about in a hundred minutes....in a hundred years.... In a thousand or a million years and where should they occur? If I survive, what seems to be an un-survivable event today? What is the impact on my life in the future? What is the impact on people that I have never met, who are affected by just knowing that something happened to me? How will they be affected if they never heard about me, but will now meet people who did, or will be moved to ponder the purpose of their own lives? Even people who did not give my situation more than a second of thought, are already affected by the knowledge. Might they then draw or give some benefit to others in the future? “I am having pain that only I can feel and know”. How does one feel who observes me in that experience, or even tries to imagine the experience even if they never meet me? The painful experience is like the pebble thrown in still water. It will create a series of outgoing ripples and that disturbance of the water will become less observable as it moves farther from center. but the intensity of the message does not fade with the ripple until it reaches the farthest shore. Not all things are fully observable, it seems.

Surviving the experience of pain can become instrumental in promoting our own emotional and spiritual growth if we make time to use our energy to analyze the experience. When Cardinal Cooke, Archbishop of New York, was dying of cancer, it was reported that he refused pain medication because he wanted to focus on the experience of Christ and God’s will. Reportedly,

he eventually died a peaceful death. To many care providing professionals his request seemed a little delusional, even silly. But would it have really been comfort, to lay in a bed, dying, with minimized awareness of one's own mental, spiritual and emotional processes while drifting in and out of sedated stupor?

Our tendency from childhood, even infancy, is to give attention to discomfort and pain and then communicate it by crying outward. However, take note how by the time a baby cries out his need for relief, his condition has been going on for a while without complaint. Is it possible that the baby is studying this new experience before deciding to call for help? Remember that learning begins even in the uterus. The response of others to our pain is also part of how we learn to deal with that discomfort.

So, an investigation of our pain reveals that there is no justice-related factor involved. The true cause of the pain is injury to our body or spirit in a specific place and form. We look at ourselves and affirm that we have been doing a good job of being a good and kind person. We have not set out to dump evil on anyone and are conscientious about that. Why then is Pain seeking me out? Is there some causal reason or process in play that I am not aware of?

To find the answer, one must look back to other times when pain was encountered in life: the little injuries like skinned knees encountered while playing; the hurts that came from losing friends by separation, abandonment or even death; our failures to keep an early romance in our youth, a failure at work or marriage, etc. Notice that all those memories are of physical, emotional or spiritual pain that has been survived. Grief is not just limited to mourning a physical death. It accepts assignment to other forms of severe loss and can be just as incapacitating. When grief is in play, all other activity must take second place in our list of priorities in allocating energy. Sadness is magnified, pain can be magnified and prolonged and the sense of hopelessness and unworthiness is exacerbated in the presence of Grief. Worst of all, grief is not always a conscious event. Yet, it has the unconscious power of undertow on what appears to be tranquil water off a beach. If one is not prepared, grief can suck a person into its current and cause panic and even despair.

We are still here, and many successes must also be recognized. We can still laugh and make a joke. We can still experience sadness and know that it will eventually pass. We have learned to be headstrong when called upon to achieve a desired goal and have sometimes amazed ourselves at the creativity we have found to do so. Could it be that all those minor and major episodes of pain and relief in our lives, have served to temper the steel of our personality, our soul, our spirit with the wisdom to know that we can arise from the floor and be ready to carry on with life?

For centuries, the Samurai sword and the swords of Damascus and Toledo steel were noted as the best in the world because of their strength, flexibility and perpetual sharpness. To accomplish that quality of performance the steel had to be exposed to alternating immersions in heat and icy cold and beaten into their final shape from the iron ore from which they were extracted. The process was done by hand and could require an average of a year to produce weapons that were also works of art. In many ways those swords are metaphors for life. We are subjected to the fire and cold of experiences and many times we feel hammered by the present

moment's events but in the end, we evolve stronger, more flexible, and better able to cope with the next challenge. Swords that have not been formed by the laborious process described, too often emerge looking good but are brittle, can't hold their sharp edge, are fragile and will break when tested in the moment of need.

There is a story told of a Navajo Indian in the U.S. Army, who during WWII, was captured and interned in a Japanese Prison Camp. Starvation was common practice as punishment for the POW's. The Navajo soldier seemed to raise the ire of one Japanese Guard who seemed to take pleasure in tormenting him. When the soldier was put into isolation and fed only old rice, the guard would add insult to injury by presenting the small ration of rice with maggots and insects crawling about. The soldier had no choice but to eat them. After the war was over, he returned to his Navajo tribe and came under care of a shaman who induced a vision as part of a healing ceremony for warriors. In the vision the Navajo came face to face with his old guard and, in a rage, asked him why he was so mean to him. The guard answered that he was impressed with the soldier's warrior spirit and tried to help him by segregating him from the others, and then giving maggots and insects to provide additional protein so that the young man would survive. The soldier had to experience pain so that he could be helped to heal himself. The guard performed an act of love hidden in the infliction of just enough pain to keep the soldier motivated to live. None-the-less, in the moment, those lessons could not have been appreciated as there was danger for both men.

We don't know what happened to the guard after the war. Certainly, we can hypothesize that he would also be changed by his interaction with the Navajo soldier. Perhaps he, too, would have found deeper insight into the meaning of his life. And what of all the people he would interact with who would learn valuable lessons about compassion, integrity and honor in life?

We do not know who is watching us in this world. It really does not matter in the short run. What does seem to matter is the understanding that there are no coincidences in this universe. It does not seem to matter what we call the master planner of the order of the universe. Things that we do in a nano-second have impacts somewhere, and we may not even be aware of it. I believe that somewhere, someplace, some time, that ripple that our choice or experience causes, collides with an object, and change occurs. When that experience happens to come with some pain, it is prudent to remember that pain in our lives has always been transient and capable of changing its intensity as we respond to its messages.

There are many remedies that man can institute without analgesic drugs. One major technique is Dissociation. Our minds cannot function on simultaneous channels. Our brain is very fast in computing, so it may appear that we can do multiple tasks at one time. In reality, we are simply processing thoughts and feelings sequentially. That being the case, we cannot focus on pain if we are focusing on something else. Think of the mind as if it were a channel selector. Many broadcasts are playing at the same time, but they are on different channels or frequencies. Only one can be seen at a time. If one pushes the button the channel will change, and the original program is no longer available to react to. We are now investing our attention on the new, possibly more pleasing broadcast. Unless we push the button again to return to the old channel that program goes on out of our sight and attention. When pain is severe, we can find respite by

training our mind to change the channel. Breathing, and paying close attention to the act of breathing allows us to stop giving attention to discomfort on the other channel. In addition, imagining, or summoning memories of more pleasant places or situations allows us to produce healing, morphine-like natural chemicals called endorphins which can mitigate pain and enhance pleasurable feelings. Focusing on the minute details of these visions can cause temporary relief of pain and discomfort, whether physical or emotional. One can train oneself to change the channel at the first sign of pain beginning with the decision to focus on breathing and allowing relaxation to naturally follow.

Once pain is relieved, or between episodes of pain, one can meditate on the reason for Pain's visit and backtrack to identify the exact moment when Pain sent the first signal. Is it possible that Pain is letting us know that the healing process is acting, and restructuring of our body may require occasional repositioning or readjustment of functions in order to get a strong healing? If that is the case, then getting out of the way by changing the channel will be more beneficial than staying on point and trying to "tough it out". Remember, that there are many causes of pain and not all of them involve punishment. Pain occurs as a reminder that we have survived a traumatic experience. The alternative of not surviving is not always acceptable. One may need to ask some questions:

Who am I in the grand scheme of things?

How does my participation in this event affect the greater universe?

Am I really, not "useful" any more or, is it time to expose my greater value in the world?

Am I really, just to be defined by my job or title...Or is there more to me?

Spiritually, surviving an "un-survivable" experience may be an indicator that there is still more to do... or to teach.... or both. We can be grateful for the opportunity to continue our journey and choose to act now.

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