



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Everything Happens for a Reason?

Rev. Lissa Gundlach, Senior Minister

August 26, 2018

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

I want to start off this morning's sermon with a meditation. I want you to think back to an early experience of family life where you learned about the meaning of suffering, your own or another person's. Maybe you skinned a knee falling off a bicycle, maybe a pet died, or a family member was ill or passed away. What do you remember learning about the reason, or the meaning, for this suffering? What did adults in your life say to you about how you should feel about suffering? If you were raised in a faith or spiritual tradition, what did that tradition have to say about suffering?

Now, I'm curious about what came up for people. As a minister, I am a lifelong student of suffering, my own, yours, and ours. I am curious about how different religions approach suffering and the cultural understandings which shape us as a nation.

For my own part, I come from hearty German and British stock, who approach suffering slightly differently. The German influence has presented itself as the understanding that suffering is a virtue. Whether it is going without a blanket and shivering through the night, or abstaining from Advil or Tylenol for a persistent ache or pain, suffering builds character. To take that extra blanket or casually pop that pain reliever would be seen as soft or weak. Suffering, a part of life, shows resilience and strength.

On my Mother's New England side, oppositely, I picked up that life is largely fair, and those who follow the rules properly and approach life with the principles of moderation and tolerance are rewarded with long life, economic means and power. I understood growing up that people who are uncomfortable with the reality of suffering often downplay or paint over their own suffering to in order to reinforce this belief. These are people who don't believe in sick days and trudge through the ice and snow without complaint and judge you if you can't take the weather.

Quietly resolute, the women in my family have a long history of making their own very real suffering seem insignificant. My grandmother suffered in silence throughout most of her life, concealing her lifelong depression. When we learned she had swift moving terminal cancer at the age of 73, she barely complained, even as she slipped away from us with astonishing speed in only four weeks, leaving us shocked at her passing.

Living out West now, when I go back East as I did this summer, I can I see clearly how different culturally it is out here. I'm curious what you began to think about when I asked you to reflect on your own cultural background. These first understandings stick with us as adults and shape our ability to make meaning of our own suffering and come to terms with the deep suffering in the world.

My family is largely not religious, or Christmas and Easter Unitarian Universalist at best. But our cultural understandings of suffering, however, do have largely Protestant Christian origins, even if subtle. With this country still largely Christian in its foundation and practice, it is helpful to explore how religious convictions influence our understandings about suffering.

Author Kate Bowler grew up in a Mennonite town in Canada surrounded by a deeply religious community which she loved very much. She married her high school sweetheart, whom she met at Bible camp. Kate lived her faith, set out to become a Christian scholar and is now a professor at Duke Divinity School. One of Kate

Bowler's areas of interest is the prosperity gospel which is an extremely popular "name it and claim it" kind of Christianity very much linked with positive thinking. "Put simply," she writes, "the prosperity gospel is the belief that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith." Those who follow the rules of Christian life are "blessed," not "lucky," and definitely not "privileged." Wealth and success signal God's favor. Those who don't follow the rules, fall short of the Gospel or practice a different kind of religion deserve to be punished for their sins and beset with tragedies, illness, and even death.

She became obsessed with the prosperity gospel after her humble Canadian Mennonite church began to subscribe to this philosophy by paying tribute to their pastor with lavish material gifts, including a motorcycle which he drove through the sanctuary, dazzling congregants and inspiring them to open their wallets to bless him with their bills. Stewardship team—maybe put that one in the file for our pledge drive?

So Kate was curious-- how could a small and humble congregation adopt these habits of mega churches? What was it about what they were preaching that appealed so much to her community?

Kate puts it this way:

I spent 10 years interviewing televangelists with spiritual formulas for how to earn God's miracle money. I held hands with people in wheelchairs being prayed for by celebrities known for their miracle touch. I sat in people's living rooms and heard about how they never would have dreamed of owning this home without the encouragement they heard on Sundays.

In Kate's young adult life, she began to dabble with the prosperity principles in her own life, with prayers for both wealth, and health. She tells the story of a bingo game which she prayed to win with instant results to the tune of \$1300. When she struggled with infertility, her prayers were answered and she was finally able to stay pregnant and have a child. As a faithful believer, though her life was not without struggle she truly trusted God would provide. Just after the birth of her son, at 35 Kate was diagnosed with incurable colon cancer. Desperate to find the right treatment, she started to notice her prosperity principles coming up short, and her faith tested: in prosperity theology, you are either blessed and favored by God, or you must have sinned and lost it. Soon Kate became obsessed with a new topic-- the spiritually unhelpful reasons both religious and secular people of all stripes offered her to explain why she, as young woman with everything going for her, would eventually die of her cancer.

In her new book *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've loved*, she writes:

My in-box is full of strangers giving reasons. People offer them to me like wildflowers they picked along the way.

A few people want me to cultivate spiritual acceptance.

"We have had many millions of births and deaths in different life-forms," explains a Hindu woman gently. "Don't worry, this life shall pass and your soul will move forward to its next step."

The world is a place of suffering, they write, a garden full of weeds that we tend as best we can.

But most everyone I meet is dying to make me certain. They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos.

Even when I was still in the hospital, a neighbor came to the door and told my husband that everything happens for a reason. "I'd love to hear it," he replied. "Pardon?" she said, startled.

"The reason my wife is dying," he said in that sweet and sour way he has, effectively ending the conversation as the neighbor stammered something and handed him a casserole.

Many of us, whether we possess that strong Christian faith, or not, have been in similar situations. We are suffering, and those around us respond in ways that harm, rather than help. In our Unitarian Universalist faith, we don't subscribe to the prosperity philosophy of health and wellness, but we live in a culture which largely does. Our culture seeks the quick and easy answers and solutions for why we suffer. Let us remind each other today, that while we are always searching for truth, meaning and purpose in our lives as they unfold, everything doesn't happen for a reason. Suffering is random and often unfair. Tragedies, accidents, and setbacks afflict all of us, regardless of our virtue or our faith. We are not lucky or blessed, and some of us enjoy privileges others do not.

In our liberal faith, we always hold open the door to making meaning together, even in the most challenging of circumstances, while acknowledging that sometimes, life's randomness cannot and should not produce anything other than grief and pain. Healing comes not through miracles but by acknowledging the very real depths of our suffering, being vulnerable to our own pain, offering ourselves compassion, and finding connection in our shared experience. Some may ask what prayers may help in such times. I often pray in honest and simple words, for comfort and for healing, careful not to overpromise in my prayers, careful not to name what an omnipotent God might easily do to make suffering disappear, or why that God caused the suffering in the first place. You might think that leaves few options for prayer, but surprisingly, asking others to join me in the humble place of unknowing, connects us tangibly by love, uplifts and encourages us.

I leave us today with a few of Kate Bowler's suggestions on how to support those who are suffering:

1. "I'd love to bring you a meal this week. Can I email you about it?" Oh, thank goodness. I am starving, but mostly I can never figure out something to tell people that I need, even if I need it. But really, bring me anything. Chocolate. A potted plant.. Do something that suits your gifts. But most important, bring me presents!
2. "You are a beautiful person." Everyone wants to know they are doing a good job without feeling like they are learning a lesson. So tell your friend something about his life that you admire without making it feel like a eulogy.
3. "I am so grateful to hear about how you're doing and just know that I'm on your team." You mean I don't have to give you an update? You asked someone else for all the gory details? Whew. Great. Ask a question about any other aspect of my life.
4. "Can I give you a hug?" Some of my best moments with people have come with a hug or a hand on the arm. People who are suffering often—not always—feel isolated and want to be touched.
5. "Oh, my friend, that sounds so hard." Perhaps the weirdest thing about having something awful happen is the fact that no one wants to hear about it. Be willing to stare down the ugliness and sadness. Life is absurdly hard, and pretending it isn't is exhausting.

6. ****Silence**** The truth is that no one knows what to say. It's awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People's weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man who wrote to me with his policy: Show up and shut up.

A FINAL PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT TO SUFFERING PEOPLE: Just remember that if cancer or divorce or tragedies of all kinds don't kill you, people's good intentions will. Take the phrase "but they mean well..." as your cue to run screaming from the room. Or demand presents. You deserve a break.

May it be so, and Amen.