

You Don't Deserve This
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These are the central moments of the religious journey. One stands there. And one sees. You see with your eyes; you see with your heart. And you wonder. And you find a way to make sense - maybe it takes a lifetime, but you find a way to make sense.

Jesus stands on Mt. Olivet. And he looks out, and sees there the temple. It is 2 kilometers away, just over a mile. That close! This is not a long journey. But he looks and sees the temple there.

And what we have is myth, speculation, after-the-fact theological justification. If, as the orthodox interpretation would have it, Jesus knows that from this place he goes to his death, as foreordained, to atone as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity - if he already knows what will, what must, happen, then he looks from the mountain and weeps. For himself? For those who know not what they do? For the pain of humanity which he comes to take away?

These are some of the orthodox interpretations. That sacrifice is noble, and holy. That one walks into pain willingly, that to be holy is to suffer as Jesus suffered.

He stands there on the mountain, and looks.
His disciples laid out the palms,
and he rode the colt, or the donkey,
into the city, and they cried Hosanna,
but who was sighing?

Did he know what was coming?
Did he embrace it willingly?
Are we supposed to do that to?

This is bravery, right?
To stand up, knowing the blow is coming?
To walk into the fire?
To sacrifice our life for something greater than
ourselves?

Well, I feel alright. No condemnation in my soul.
I've been sanctified.

The composer, Alice Parker, worked from Dr. King's
favorite Biblical passages. From Romans:
There is therefore now no condemnation to them;
and Dr. King's words: Well, I feel alright.
And the night before he was killed, King said,
"I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind."
Which mountain? The Mt. of Olives?

He saw what might be.

And we take some comfort, maybe, the martyr
chooses. He goes willingly.

But I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

I'm not sure this is good theology, or good history.

King also says, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life."

Jesus weeps.

We have a whole mythology -

Jesus knew he needed to die for the cause.

Did he?

Or were his followers so bereft that they invented, post hoc, a story to make it better?

Is suffering the way to holiness?

Or is this doctrine, that sacrifice is sacred, a way to ease our pain?

Or even — even — is it a way that the powerful convince the less powerful that they shouldn't complain about their suffering, their oppression.

"It is your cross to bear, I guess."

"Turn the other cheek."

"Your reward is in heaven."

"How they put up with such evil, without a complaint: they must be a saint."

Lies.

You know what's better than dying for a cause?

Living for it.

You what's better than pain and oppression?

Joy and liberation.

You know what's better than suffering?

Not suffering.

The notion that suffering is inherently sacred,

that we are supposed to, that it redeems us or anyone else is bad theology and dangerous nonsense. It is a lie. It's malarkey, claptrap, bull. Lies.

What if Jesus had not been arrested that day?
Or if he'd been freed?
And he'd walked out of the city,
and the movement had grown?
And so many people had come to see that the kingdom of God was within them,
and had learned the practice of radical love,
and a religion had bloomed in the desert?
One without violence as the answer,
and one where death wasn't the symbol,
but life was instead?

Those mosaics, this is the alternative vision:
not Jesus on the cross, but in the garden.
Holding baby lambs, flowers blooming.
Springtime in the soul. Peace in the heart.

What if?

What if King hadn't been shot down?
What if he'd had more time to make the case that racial justice, economic justice, and the struggle against war were in fact one struggle?
What if he'd been alive to stand against Nixon's politics of division? To be a bridge between the civil rights movement and the demand for black power.

What if both men had died at home, in their bed, with their grandchildren by their side? Isn't that better? Isn't that just as worthy of praise and memory?

Maybe we could stop idolizing suffering?
And start giving our worship and praise to beauty?
Start giving our worship and praise and attention to
peace, to love; yes, to courage, but not say that
suffering is required as evidence of holiness.

Let me give a concrete example.
You see this a lot in social media, also sometimes in
the last few minutes of the evening news:
some inspiring story of someone overcoming a
challenge. Oh, this person was born with such-and-
such, or they had this illness, or accident,
but look what they can do.

Sometimes this restores a lost sense of dignity.
But often, this is what disability advocates call
“disability porn.”

It objectifies those who struggle, uses them as a way
to get some of us to feel a sense of pathos,
of sympathy and humility.

It’s a fine line, but, as the saying goes,
you usually know it when you see it.

Closely tied to the idea that suffering is redemptive —
that by suffering we become more holy, that we prove
our moral worth — is the idea that suffering is the
natural consequence of evil.

That if something bad happens to us, it is because we
deserve it. We did something, maybe we don’t know
what, and we’re being punished.

Or our ancestor did something, maybe it goes all the
way back - it was Adam’s fault, it was Eve’s.
But somehow, you deserved this.

I was sure I deserved every last moment of abuse, every blow, every bad name. I was sure I earned it, sure I didn't deserve better. I *knew* all of these things ... until that moment.

I like you for being you.

That's it.

Not because you suffer, or because you did the right thing. Just for being you.

How could anyone ever say that you were anything but beautiful. Can't you see that your loving is a miracle?

I like you for being you.

Look, there are times we make bad choices, and we should know better:

we skip work over and over again,

we drink and drive,

we turn away from the truth;

there are times we make bad choices and we pay a price. That happens.

But that's not mostly what I hear. I hear bad luck.

Accidents. Illness. Layoffs.

Mistreatment, abuse, pain at the hands of another.

And what I want to say is "you don't deserve this."

You don't.

And suffering isn't necessary to grow, it isn't needed to be holy, it isn't a sign of your worth.

You don't have to walk on your knees through the desert for a hundred miles, repenting.

Suffering isn't a sign of your depravity, and it isn't a sign of your holiness, either.
It just is. It just is. It just happens.

Jesus stands on Mt. Olivet and looks down, and weeps. His followers, a week later, grieve his loss and seek for meaning.

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About 500 years before that, a young man in northern India walks down the street. He looks and he sees suffering: poverty, illness, and death. And he wonders what it means. And he thinks, maybe we are supposed to be living martyrs, deny ourselves all things. Be joyless. But after doing this for years, he rejects it. Sitting under the Bhodi tree, he says, no, suffering is a natural part of life, but what really causes pain is when we are attached to things that cannot last. And there is a way — not self-denial, not flagellation, but a way of non-attachment, a way of true joy in the moment, a way of loving kindness.

Suffering happens.
Sometimes because of deliberate action by ourselves or others.

Sometimes because we are finite beings,
and illness and death and accidents and natural
disasters happen.

And there are things we can do to lessen suffering:
the practices of medicine and justice and building-
codes and airbags and so forth.

But still, suffering happens.

These are the central moments of the religious
journey. One stands there. And one sees.
You see with your eyes; you see with your heart.

And in the end, the Buddha, under the Bhodi tree;
Jesus, looking down from the mountain;
they offer us something other than explanations for
suffering. Oh, we search for those explanations.
Why, Lord? Why?
We search, but the plate of explanation is empty,
it will not feed us. Instead, they offer something else.

Compassion. Heart. Love.

The question isn't "why do we suffer?"
The question is, "now what?"

Can you, from your heart, hold and love another?
Be merciful and compassionate?
Offer no explanations, no excuses, no subtle or
unsubtle words that really mean
"you must have done something to deserve it."
Instead, say, "I love you for who you are."
Your loving is a miracle.

The next time I saw him, he was talking to one of my little clients. When they were done with their session, he helped her out of her chair, took both of her hands, looked her in the eyes and said: "And remember, I like you just for being you."

Is it good that the man suffered abuse, so he could give that word of healing to the little girl?

No, it is not.

It would be better if he had not been abused.

He didn't deserve it, and it didn't make him holy.

He was holy already, as all are.

But that he, from his pain, found a way to help another: well, that is worthy of praise.

It isn't his suffering that we praise, it is his love.

The tears flow. They will.

For all that is sad, we will weep.

But, to use the metaphor, we can boil it.

Make tear water tea. A bit salty.

But it is the boiling, the transformation of it into compassion, that redeems - not the suffering; the compassion.

And it is, too, joy. It is joy that redeems.

Suffering is real, but it isn't all there is.

It's part of life, but not the whole of it.

If we grow too attached to the particular form of joy, we will suffer when that form changes, as it must; but if we open our hearts to joy and love and beauty,

knowing that these things are just as much as part of life as pain, then this joy is a succor, a balm, and a healing power for our lives and the lives of others.

There is winter and there is spring,
Joy and sorrow are woven fine,
but joy is real too,
and after the night of despair, there is the morning.
The crocus' are poking up the heads,
and the grass is starting to turn green,
and someday we can open the window.
In the midst of our despair, something sings.
For what the orthodox version of the story gets wrong,
this part they get right:
that after Good Friday comes Easter.
That even from despair we can rise again,
try again, love again, hope again.
Suffering does not save us, and we don't deserve it.
But joy? Hope? Love? Compassion and mercy?
That does save us. That we deserve - all of us.
That we are capable of.
Suffering is real, but it is never the end of the story,
not the whole story anyway, for love is stronger than
death, and always something sings.

When you walk the road of pain, or see another who
does, do not then try to explain it.
Do not say, I guess you deserve it. Or, I guess I
deserve it.
Do not say, your suffering makes you holy. Or, this will
redeem me. Do not try to feed the hungry with empty
plates.

Instead, serve of a dish of mercy and compassion.

Say, I like you for being you.
Sing hosanna for the joy that still lives even when we
don't feel it.
Offer the miracle of love, and accept it when it is
offered unto you.
For, even in deep despair, always something sings.
Always something sings.
Let us rise.
Let us rise.
Let us sing.