

THE VICE AND VERSA OF PAIN

Call me spoiled, but I've never been much for pain. I'm not sure where I learned my preference for pleasure, but I remember when some fellow Boy Scouts were "frogging" the sides of our shelters at Camp Indian Head, I had no stomach for this pastime. "Though the frogs were thrown in sport," said our Presbyterian scoutmaster chastising the culprits, "they surely died in earnest." I also recall reading with horror an article on the filming of *Lord of the Flies*. On a remote Caribbean island, some of the unsupervised child actors had collected lizards and were secretly observed by their chaperone tossing them lazily into their tent's electric fan. Though a sadistic nanny might have altered the Epicurean outcome for me, I can't imagine that dicing lizards on the fly would have entertained me at any age. Growing up, I was more like our grandson who apologizes to the branches he pushes from his path when we walk in the woods.

Nevertheless, one of the best things we ever did for our daughter was to encourage her to work one summer at Camp Burnt Gin, a state-run camp for the mentally retarded and physically handicapped. For the able bodied, it was a boot camp in suffering with merit badges awarded for pain shared. Feeding, dressing, washing, and diapering mostly adolescents who could not perform these functions for themselves amounted to a forced lesson in empathy though I suppose it could have ended in disgust. The closed sphere of self-involvement in which she had orbited for sixteen years suddenly became an arc resembling two open arms.

The sensitive but self-absorbed character of Laura in Katherine Mansfield's fine story "The Garden Party" used to remind me of our daughter before that summer at Burnt Gin. Laura's world consisted of a tightly laced social circle at the center of which was an aristocratic family outside of whose protective embrace she had rarely traveled. True, she had learned from the family servants that the classes spoke different dialects. And she had noticed the "little rags and shreds of smoke so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the chimneys" of the wealthy. But her chief occupations were what to wear, how not to appear foolish, and where to place that tent ordered for the garden party. One afternoon just minutes before another gay fete, an elaborate and expensive ploy to escape the boredom of manor life, word comes of a tragic accident in the village just beyond the circumference of her world: a young father has been killed when thrown from his horse. Daringly but naively, Laura volunteers to take some party leftovers to the grieving family. Approaching the death vigil and seeing how unobtrusively the other mourners are dressed, she feels uncomfortable in her lace frock and velvet-ribboned hat. Mansfield subtly implies that the closer Laura comes to the open casket, the wider the aperture of her world opens. Finally she sees the dead man's serenely beautiful face, and in a stunning epiphany, she realizes she cannot return to the artifice of a world where "kisses, voices, tinkling spoons, laughter, and the smell of crushed grass" reign among life's higher priorities.

Teaching Mansfield's story recently in an introduction to literature course, I asked if Laura's self-inflicted discomfort had been instructive. One student volunteered that Laura reminded him of Job even if his tribulations were greater. Acceptance of matters over which humans have little or no control such as this accidental death in the neighborhood was Mansfield's message, the student argued. Indeed, most of Job's readers will tell you

that the message is one of stoic resignation. But I enjoy rattling their shutters by claiming that as much as God would like to help His suffering servant, He can't. He cannot any more than He can influence the outcome of the wager with Satan that opens the tale because He granted His servant free will at the creation, and He's not about to revoke it now. I remind classes of how in *The Iliad*, all-knowing Zeus is unable to save his mortal son Sarpedon because fate is greater than the gods. Like "sex in heaven," as Lily Tomlin observed, suffering is there as well; "we just don't feel it." Needless to say, few fundamentalists are persuaded by Tomlin's argument, Homer's, or mine.

After "The Garden Party," the class turned to Matthew's account of the crucifixion. Since I was having trouble getting them to respond, I required them to write a question for homework—anything, major or minor—as long as it dealt with Jesus' death. A couple of students wondered whether God is a sadist forcing his son to undergo such torture before he can return home. I apologized for God and myself saying I did not have an answer. Frankly, I'd never thought of the Creator as bloodthirsty, but then I try to distinguish between Him and Jehovah. By the same token since every thesis has its antithesis, I'd never thought of Jesus as a masochist or even a joyless ascetic. I reminded the class of the description in Matthew where Jesus "came eating and drinking [wine]." For his lightsome efforts, Jesus is condemned as a glutton though there's no indication he ever overindulges. John the Baptist, on the other hand, who is far more self-denying than Jesus, abstains from alcohol and is accused of harboring a demon for his efforts.

The question, however, that interested me most came from a forthright but anonymous student who asked, "Why did Jesus only survive nine hours on the cross when others made it a week or two? Did he take the easy way out, and if so what does this say about his resolve as opposed to later martyrs who suffered worse and longer deaths? As an example of how to live and weather pain, should he not have lasted a little longer?" In thirty years of teaching, I don't think I've received a more original or more troubling question from a student. Biting my tongue, I drew out the correct length of time Jesus lived on the cross—six, not nine hours. I added that it's true some Roman victims did die from the initial shock of being nailed to the cross while others lingered for days; weeks, however, seemed an exaggeration. Sadistic as the Romans could be, they were not Nazis; if they kept records on which of their victims survived the longest, we don't have them. With only an hourglass and sundial to keep time in the first century, accurate measurements were impossible anyway.

But then I could not restrain myself any longer, and without any more segue than a brief pause, I said, "If you need a kidney to live, and your brother donates one but dies in the process, does it matter whether he lingered one day or two? Isn't your debt to him the same?" Unfortunately Anon was absent the day I read his or her question, but I still recall members of the class looking nervously about for any clues that might disclose an identity. Still the discussion was lively though no one including myself understood where the question had originated.

The "knee-worn floors" of Matthew Arnold's "Grand Chartreuse," the next item on the syllabus, led us naturally into a discussion of self-mortification. One Catholic student said her aunt was a nun who was "trying to master the art of doing nothing except praying." She said her aunt had read Jesus' implicit challenge in Matthew 19 and decided very young that she was one "who could take it." And while she had not cut off her breasts as

some Russian women had, she'd borne no children and remained a virgin. I said that just because Jesus had spent six hours of his thirty-some years on the cross, there is no compelling reason for people to duplicate the crucifixion every day of their lives literally or figuratively. I said I respected people like this student's aunt, but I had more respect for ascetics who invested their lives directly and concretely in the salvation of the world, people like St. Francis and Mother Teresa. I recalled a story Buddha had told about a monk who'd spent most of his life learning to walk on water. Buddha chastised the monk's waste of time saying that for a penny he could have taken the ferry. I wonder if most extreme ascetics don't live to regret the sacrifices they have made based on the shaky assumption that God is impressed by epic displays of self-denial. Nature's lesson, of course, is propagate!

Not long after this class discussion, Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* opened in theaters everywhere in March of 2004, and this was followed by a spate of good and bad reviews in the national press. But the reaction that most captured my attention appeared in the local paper, *The Greenville News*. The author, a middle-aged Christian woman, admitted that while she personally had no qualms about the film, some reviewers had seen the torture of Jesus leading up to the crucifixion as "pornographic" in its excess. What occupies three sentences in four gospels mushrooms to take up ten minutes in the film. Realize that no Christian artist carved or painted Jesus on the cross for four hundred years after the church's founding. Such a death was for criminals, so the early Christians, preoccupied with increasing their numbers, were not of a mind to broadcast the way their messiah died. Many missionaries even today take down their altar crucifix when they see their apprentices's faces. As one young African animist put it, "If this is the way God treats His son, imagine what's in store for us?"

The exaggerations of Jesus' suffering began in the fifteenth century when the church recognized that by placing more emphasis on what came to be known as the Stations of the Cross, it could draw more converts to its plague-depleted congregations. But instead of obscene violence and distortions of the record, the *Greenville News'* reviewer saw "God's grace and love...revealed in the suffering and sacrificial death of the Son of God. [Gibson's violence] helps explain," she wrote, "why Christ's followers consider that his teachings and earthly example would be meaningless had they not been followed by his suffering and death...."

Since this editorial was followed by the author's email address, I accepted the implied invitation and wrote. "Dear Susan: Can't say that I enjoyed your review of Gibson's *Passion*.... As for your rationalizations concerning Jesus' suffering, I fail to see how 'God's grace and love are revealed in the suffering...of the Son of God.' Consider if Jesus had died instantly from a blow to the head delivered by a deranged legionnaire somewhere along the Via Dolorosa. And suppose Jesus had risen miraculously from his rock-solid grave the following Sunday. Wouldn't the history of Christianity read much the same from the resurrection on? I have to think it would. Why did Peter and the rest, who ran away and thus saw none of the scourging nor the crucifixion, risk or give their lives to propagate Jesus' radical though illegal theology? Guilt surely had a lot to do with it, but mainly, I suspect, it was the miraculous reappearance of a scarred but otherwise healthy man who had just stepped from his grave.

"Paul is another case entirely. He never knew Jesus and so could not have witnessed any of the violence done to him, yet because he had once persecuted Christians, guilt

probably was a motive. But more than guilt, I suspect it was Paul's realization that the paradox at the core of Jesus' teaching is not a contradiction. Counterintuitive as it is to economic theory, individual accounts are increased by frequent expenditures, not by sealing the vault. Truth and reason, after all, have a momentum of their own, and, as I see it, they swept Paul along with Peter and the rest."

A few days later the journalist replied. "Dear Dr. Eisiminger: Thank you for your comments. I wrote from the standpoint of a believer. From my perspective, the life and death of Jesus would have made him little more than a great teacher who died a brutal death if those events had not been followed by the resurrection. Sincerely, Susan" Clearly she'd missed my point, so I wrote back. "Dear Susan, You missed the point. My point has to do with the film's exaggeration of Jesus' suffering, not the resurrection. Do you really think that Jesus' teachings on love would have been diminished if Jesus had not suffered so terribly before and on the cross? If Hitler had been captured by the Russians in 1945 and tortured to death, I grant you there'd be more Neo-Nazis today, but it would not have made his Final Solution any more acceptable. When it comes to the legitimacy of an argument, the degree of suffering is a non-issue."

I never received an answer to this query, and I don't expect I ever will. I must say, however, I was pleased that Mel Gibson apparently agreed with me: he cut some six minutes of the more violent scenes and reissued the film under the title "The Passion Recut" in March of 2005. "By softening some of its more wrenching aspects," Gibson wrote, "I hope to make my film and its message of love available to a wider audience." If my journalistic correspondent ever does respond, I shall remind her of Gibson's decision to edit. I shall also tell her that Buddha, Muhammad, Confucius, Zoraster, and Moses are all thought to have died natural deaths; not one was tortured or crucified. Yet each of these men founded a religion which has adherents some three thousand years later. Something similar can be said for Plato, Aristotle, and a host of other moral philosophers, yet not one of these men or their followers ever used suffering as a bullhorn to call people to God the way some Christian apologists trumpet Jesus' pain. As I once asked a Sunday-school class, if my mother dies in a house fire and my father is killed by a drive-by shooter, do I owe my mother any more because she suffered longer? If the duration and intensity of suffering are indicators of the truth, shouldn't we all be Jews? Yet as many tears as I have shed watching *Schindler's List* and reading Elie Wiesel, I have never been tempted to convert. The suffering of others has made me sympathetic and appreciative, but rarely has it changed my mind.

Notice that I wrote *rarely*, not *never*. In the departmental coffee lounge a few years ago, a friend asked me if the verb *to boast* had any positive connotations. I said that I recalled reading travel brochures that used the word to promote an area's tourist potential. A mountain resort might "boast" of its panoramic view, for example. My friend said the reason he asked was that the Bible text chosen by his minister the day before had used *boast* in an odd way: good Christians, according to Paul, should "boast in their sufferings because suffering yields endurance; endurance yields character, and character yields hope." Another colleague who overheard this said, "Bullshit! Suffering produces bitterness; bitterness produces anger; anger produces violence, pain, misery, and hopelessness! What's to boast about?"

I don't know whether this fellow had been reading Somerset Maugham, but Maugham says something similar in *The Summing Up*: "I knew that suffering did not ennoble; it degraded. It made men selfish, mean, petty, and suspicious. It absorbed them in small

things...it made them less than men....” This thought led me back to Jesus’ suffering and the more instructive pain of Gandhi some two thousand years later. Jesus, once the Romans took custody of him, was a helpless voodoo doll, stuck with pins whenever and wherever the soldiers’ sadistic spirits took them. That’s the sort of suffering that makes me look away from the screen or the page, sympathetic as I may be with the victim. Gandhi, on the other hand, freely defied the British monopoly by making salt and daring the colonial authorities to arrest him. When they foolishly took his proffered bait, Gandhi went on a prolonged hunger strike, but which garnered sympathy for his cause, the independence of India from Great Britain. Here then is a case where suffering clearly did change minds perhaps faster than Gandhi’s writings or speeches could. “I can sympathize with everything except suffering” writes Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, yet millions of Indians did sympathize with Gandhi, and many joined him in his jailhouse fast. Had I been there, I fancy I would have joined them.

Yet when people change their minds because others have suffered, the paradigm most of us look to isn’t Jesus or Gandhi; it’s a relative or friend. Several years ago, a student of mine (I’ll call her Mary), was racing back to campus one Sunday at dusk with her best friend and roommate riding shotgun. Fatally overconfident in the joy of the moment, neither was wearing a seatbelt. The narrow, winding country road was one Mary knew well since it was the shortest route between her home and school. At a notorious crossroads, the setting sun directly in her eyes, Mary sped through a stop sign she evidently did not see. Midway through the intersection, Mary’s older sedan was struck on the driver’s side by a large pickup pulling a boat. Police estimated that both vehicles were traveling about 50 mph in a 35 mph zone. The force of the impact threw Mary across the front seat directly into the body of her friend who absorbed the lion’s share of Mary’s momentum, saving Mary, but killing her friend. The driver of the truck was saved by his airbag, a relatively new technology at the time. A year later when Mary was well enough to return to school, she changed her major from English to nursing saying she wanted to spend the rest of her life “absorbing the pain of others.”

While the suffering of others may change the way we live and think, usually all it changes is the way we feel. My wife of forty years has had four surgeries in the last fifteen years including a mastectomy and a spinal-disk operation. During this time, my feelings for her have deepened as I have seen her pain and contemplated the void without her. However, as much as I love her, I have never considered changing my opposition to the death penalty, which she supports. And she’s smart enough not to want me to either, at least not on the “evidence” of her suffering.

Martin Luther King apparently read Paul’s observation that “the sufferings of the present are nothing compared to the glory to come” and decided that “suffering is redemptive.” (Imagine all the whipped slaves, battered wives, and Jews in heaven if King is right!) Though Catholics have argued for centuries that good works are the key to salvation, and Protestants have countered that faith is the key, Elbert Hubbard said it’s neither: “God will be looking for our scars, not our medals and degrees.” To both Hubbard and King, suffering is a down payment on a bungalow in heaven. This rationalization strikes me as seriously misguided theology. But given such a rationale, Christian ministers for two millennia have told mistreated servants, children, and wives to go home and “turn the other cheek.” It is appalling that ministers of God have been partners in prolonging suf-

fering, but ultimately the fault lies with Jesus in failing to define just when we should offer that other cheek. The insult Jesus felt when he saw money being exchanged in the temple, for example, did not lead him to walk away; instead, he responded with a manic display of righteous indignation. Clearly then, turning the other cheek was not a categorical imperative for him, and it shouldn't be for us. If the Austrians did the right thing inviting Hitler to assume power, should the Poles have followed suit? Unfortunately, the Sermon on the Mount stops well short of defining any limits that would help his followers decide.

According to a poll reported in the June 2001 *Harper's*, a large segment of the "seriously ill" in America hopes to be "at peace with God" when death finally comes, but a larger segment says that "being pain free" is a higher priority. When it comes to a choice between pain relief and God, most of us find the relaxation of pain to be more compelling. I would modify Bertold Brecht's famous dictum "First bread, then ethics," to "First morphine, then religion." On his death bed, my uncle Bob once told me that if I wanted to lift my spirits, I should raise a tumbler of Jack Daniels to my lips. Indeed, after a few ounces of his "Kentucky sacrament," he departed this world feeling immortal and invisible, and now he is.

SCALES, FEATHERS, AND SKIN

Above a reef of pine,
a roiling swarm of birds
schools like shad—

hundreds banking as one
above a child in a tree beside a pond
who follows dolphin through the fleece—
an exaltation of minnow
soaring in a cloud.

A cloud whose margins
are lobed and undulating
as the human brain,

or, for that matter,
Michelangelo's fluttering drapery
that floats the Creator, Eve,
and a shoal of angels,
all hovering in amazement,
away from rock-bound Adam.