

Quarterly Yoke Letter

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Renewing The Spirit...Renewing The Mind...

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Dear Friends,

Suffering...It is something that we have experienced or witnessed someone else experience. As Christians, it is an issue that has both challenged our faith, and/or made our faith stronger. And it raises a difficult question: "How do we reconcile a loving, all powerful God with the problem of evil and suffering?" It is a question that has plagued humanity since its beginning. Authors have written about it, teachers have taught about it, preachers have preached about it, and you and I have talked about it. A child is hit by a car and killed; a tornado rips through a town causing mass destruction and death; Osama Bin Laden orders a terrorist attack and innocent human beings are killed. And we ask, "Where is God?" "How could God allow this to happen?" These are ancient questions, and they are modern questions. They are questions that can make or break one's faith.

As we consider the issue of suffering and evil, it is important to begin with two assumptions that will underlie what I write in the rest of this *Letter*: 1. God is love and just, and good. 2. Suffering and what we can call "evil" in this world *seems* to separate us from the first assumption.

Suffering can be caused by two types of evil. First, there is *human evil* that causes suffering through the free-will actions of persons. Throughout human history there are endless examples of man's inhumanity to man. The Holocaust is the most vivid example of this type of evil in this century, but in recent history, 9/11 has brought this issue to the forefront of our thinking. In an interview that Bill Moyers conducted just following 9/11 with Andrew Delbanco, a professor of humanities at Columbia University, he asked him to define human evil. Delbanco said, "For me, the best I've been able to do is to recognize and come to terms with the reality that there are human beings who are able, by convincing themselves that there is some higher good, some higher ideal to which their lives should be dedicated, that the pain and suffering of other individuals does not matter...it is the absence of the imaginative sympathy for other human beings...The inability to see your victims as humans...To think of them as instruments or cogs or elements or statistics, but not as human beings." Delbanco went on to say that what 9/11 helped us understand is that evil simmers and lies dormant in the world and in each of us.

A second type of evil can be called *natural evil*. Tornadoes, earthquakes, disease, etc. are all examples of what we can call natural evil. When I was a student at the Earlham School of Religion, I had a theology professor who said that if we want to connect with and feel the horrors of natural evil, we should read *The Plague* by Albert Camus. In a powerful way, Camus' writing moves us to *live with* the inhabitants of a town engulfed with the plague. One passage concerning "All Soul's Day" is especially moving: "All Soul's Day that year was very different from what it had been in former years...in the plague year people no longer wished to be reminded of their dead. Because, indeed, they were thinking all too much about them as it was...each day was for us a Day of the Dead." On the last page, the main character of the book, Dr. Rieux, is listening to the surviving inhabitants of his town celebrate the end of the plague: "...as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city."

How do we resolve or reconcile the problem of evil with our assumption about a good and loving God? The issue arises every time we are faced with a human initiated evil or whenever we face natural evils like hurricanes, cancers or plagues. Evil and suffering is a problem for our theology, because if we believe in an all-

powerful God, we ask, “Why would God allow such evil to happen?” The tendency is to say, either God does not care, or God is not able to make a difference. Either God is lacking in concern, or lacking in power.

I am grateful to Elton Trueblood for many things, but as we consider this issue, I am most grateful for his Christian philosophical mind. We are helped by his observations, shared in a lecture many years ago at the founding of the Trueblood Yokefellow Academy:

1. Christ, in revealing God to us does not promise us easy lives. He does not say that all of our burdens, pains, illnesses and suffering will be taken away. In the Garden he prayed, “Oh God, if it be your will, take this cross from me.” And he was crucified and he died. Now, this is not the end of the story, but it is important to understand that the Christian faith is not dependent upon an easy success story, but upon the cross.

2. The pain and suffering that comes from evil can be redemptive. There are numerous instances throughout history where a person has suffered, or a whole community has suffered, and that person or community has been able to lift up other people and communities by the quality of life shown in response to pain. It is important to acknowledge that the most effective lives...lives that have touched us most profoundly...are not those in which everything is nice and which is free of pain. Pain, bad as it is, can, under certain circumstances, be redemptive.

3. We have to contend with our own ignorance. We do not see very much. As Paul has said, “We see through a glass darkly,” and so we cannot know. This is the answer that came to Job...His conclusion is that we see too little in order to be able to make a total judgment.

4. Evil is the necessary price of freedom. God could have made us so that we never sin, but we would not be persons. With all of our failures, we represent the highest level of the creation...from matter to life, to mind, to spirit. Intrinsic within personhood is the element of choice. All of our life is choosing...hour after hour, day after day. It is inevitable that if people are free to choose, they are free to make evil choices...choices that can kill thousands of innocent people. We can ask ourselves, which kind of world we would rather have...a world in which all is determined, or a world of freedom, pain, sorrow, anger, injustice and sin?

5. If God is, and if God is like Christ, as Christians believe, then God is wounded by our pain and sorrow and suffering. Since justice is not done in this life, and we believe in a good, loving and just God, there has to be another life in which justice is done. If not, God is defeated. If this life is all, then God’s redemptive purpose is defeated.

Some years ago I was personally working through some very deep pains in my own life. During this dark time I wrote a credo I have called, “God of Pilgrimage” that I have previously shared through this *Letter*, but it seems appropriate to share again. I wrote this as I sought to make sense of a loving God in a suffering world. It shows how I evolved in my theology to a new understanding of God’s omnipotence, the omnipotence of love...

I no longer believe in an all-powerful God... a God who sits high above the clouds
and dispenses wrath at will and for whom excuses must be made when
children are killed, and hurricanes strike, and AIDS takes the life of a friend.

I do believe in a God of incarnation... a God who is real, and who suffers
with me, and laughs with me, and who walks with me in the darkest times of
doubt...but lets me doubt.

I believe in a God who is still loving and creating... a God who is still forgiving and blessing,
who is still evolving in chaos with me, and who shares my joys and my sorrows...

And so I no longer believe in an all-powerful God...but in a real God of passion and pain...
A God whom I can explore in prayer and dance with in paradox...A God who is on pilgrimage
with me, and in whom resides the soul of a child, opening to me passages into the eternal.

This is a God in whom I can believe...who can be experienced in the beauty of nature,
and who is reflected in the eyes of a struggling humanity. This is the God of the double search,
who I seek in my spiritual quest, and who also seeks me.

Faithfully,

James R. Newby

