

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
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Improving on Job

For those of you who weren't raised Jewish, Christian, or Muslim — or if, by some happy chance, you weren't otherwise instructed with the wildly problematic story of the biblical prophet Job— let's begin with the briefest possible synopsis.

Job lives a charmed and faithful life. He is, we are told, “blameless” and “upright.” One day, G*d and Satan get to talking. G*d brags about Job's goodness; Satan argues that Job is only good because his life is so sweet. Satan says he can turn Job against G*d in a heartbeat — kill his livestock, kill his servants, kill his ten children: torment this innocent man, and force him to recant. G*d says, Okay, but don't kill him.

So it all comes to pass — the full catastrophe. And Job continues to pray to G*d, believing in G*d's goodness and mercy. As if this isn't already the worst story ever, Satan says he'd like another go at it and G*d, intent on winning the wager, tells Satan to have at it. Satan then attacks Job's health, afflicting him with terrible sores all over his body. I will spare you the gory details of his anguish.

But Job remains faithful. Satan is vanquished. And G*d, victorious, rewards Job by restoring his health, providing him with twice as much property as before, new servants, and new children — “replacement” children.

It is noteworthy that Job's wife is nameless. I searched everywhere for a poem I heard once that was written in her voice; it was probably censored as blasphemous. She is speaking to G*d. I have not forgotten her final, chilling line; she cries out, “What have you done with my children?”

This morning, I'm going to shred the line of thinking that Job's patience is exemplary and his suffering redemptive. The story of Job is an excellent case study in significant places Unitarian Universalist theology departs — I think I should say, swerves away from — more traditional theology, and offers something life-giving in its place.

to everyone at the service that morning. Preston wasn't saying that suffering was redemptive. He was saying that suffering just is, and that our mission is to honor whatever life we have left, and to be joyful.

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Some of you will remember that, years ago in Santa Fe, my friend Nuala Murphy was driving home one dark summer night when a young man shot out of a side street on a motorcycle with no running lights. She didn't hit him, but he crashed into the back of the passenger side of her van. She never saw him, but she heard it. When the ambulance arrived, the crew was very grave. His life was hanging in the balance.

Someone called a lawyer. The lawyer said there would almost certainly be a lawsuit, and that Nuala was to speak to no one.

We stayed up all night, praying. Nuala was pregnant with her first child — a boy — and she couldn't bear the idea that she might in some way be connected to the death of another mother's son.

In the morning, she said to me, "I have to go to him." She didn't care what the lawyer had said; she had to see him, and she had to speak to him, even if he couldn't hear her. There was no talking her out of it. We stopped only to buy a spray of irises.

Astonishingly, when we arrived at the hospital and found his room, he was sitting up in bed, surrounded by friends and family. He looked horrible, but he was alive. Everyone looked up as we darkened the door. Stepping inside, Nuala said, "I'm the one that was driving the van." Suddenly, it was silent. Cradling the flowers, she went to him. His people parted. Nuala opened her arms and he reached up his arms to her. They enfolded one another in a long, tear-soaked embrace.

There was no lawsuit.

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When we suffer, we are more deeply connected to everyone and everything. If we're paying attention — if we remember that we are never alone when we suffer — it can open our hearts. This is what it means to make meaning of suffering: to ignite our compassion, to forgive, to insist on kindness, no matter what. Mother Teresa said,

"If we have no peace,
it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

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If Job's story is not a good illustration of reasons to be patient, and if we conclude that suffering has no inherent merit, what can we make of it? I love the way it sends us off looking for new ideas about a higher power.

Some of you have concluded there is none. Here are some other possibilities:

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says,
 "My religion is kindness."

Kindness is a good god.

Some of us go with "G*d is love" — also biblical, from the Book of John.¹ Love is god; G*d equals love. We can substitute the word G*d with love.

And then there's this: Rabbi Harold Kushner, reeling at the death of his 14-year-old son, wondered why bad things happen to good people, went on a search, and wrote a book that changed his life and the lives of thousands of people, including mine. One of his first conclusions was that there's often no connection between how we live our lives and what happens to us. I say,
 There's no such thing as "deserve."

Unless we believe in reincarnation, the transmigration of the soul, and karma — the law governing cause and effect, which says that the sum of all our actions in all previous states of existence will determine our fate — then we cannot possibly believe that everything happens for a reason or that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. What doesn't kill us doesn't kill us. And whether or not we make sense or meaning out of what happens is entirely up to us.

Rabbi Kushner concluded that G*d is benevolent but not all-powerful. Evil happens, and G*d rushes in — often in the form of those who help — to comfort the afflicted. He said, "It is the result [of pain] — not the cause [of pain] — that makes some experiences of pain meaningful and others destructive."

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Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist, pioneered studies in dying, and created the five stages of coming to terms with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She taught that they don't necessarily

¹ 1 John 4:8

happen in that order — they’re in no way tidy — and most losses, not just deaths, will bring on the stages.

Dr. Kübler-Ross’ friend, David Kessler, co-authored one of her last books, *On Grief and Grieving*, in which they applied the five stages to the grieving process — again, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And then something terrible happened: David’s 21-year-old son died of an overdose. In the wake of this unimaginable loss, he says, “I faced a decision that everyone faces in grief. Is this just hideous, or can it be part of my son’s legacy and meaning that he comes with me ... to help people? ...

“Accepting loss is essential, but [then what]?,” he wondered. “To live on after tragedy requires more than acceptance.” And so David Kessler added a sixth stage of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and *making meaning*. “The meaning isn’t in the death,” he says. “It’s in me and what I do with it.”² He is speaking of bearing witness to those who have gone before us by carrying forth the gifts they bequeathed to us and carrying them forth into the world. “The pain isn’t gone,” he says, “[but now it’s] balanced more by love.... When [I enter] a workshop or lecture, [I feel my] son’s presence.”³

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I’m thinking about Job and his poor wife, and how the story not only gives us a terrible god but also misses the opportunity to teach us something about loss, grieving, and meaning-making. Can we salvage anything from it? My friend and colleague in Rockport, Rev. Susan Moran, told me that biblical scholars now agree that the first two chapters of the Book of Job were originally a stand-alone story; the next chapters were a later addition, by a different author.

Here’s the final passage at the close of Chapter 2 — what just might be the end of the story:

When Job's three friends heard about all these calamities
that had befallen him,
each came from his own house —
Eliphaz the Temanite; Bildad the Shuhite; and Zophar the Naamathite.
They went together to go and mourn with him and comfort him.
When they saw him from a distance, they could not recognize him,

² from a podcast with Brené Brown

³ please see [latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2019-11-15/finding-meaning-david-kessler](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2019-11-15/finding-meaning-david-kessler)

and they broke into loud weeping.
 Each one tore his own robe and threw dust into his hair....
 No one spoke a word to him, for they saw how very great was his suffering....
 And they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights.⁴

How beautiful is that? A perfect model of opening the heart of compassion to another's suffering and accompanying them in living beyond loss— weeping with them, sitting with them in silence, staying with them to anchor them to life.

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Sometimes, even in the midst of suffering, there come unexpected gifts. Let's close with this story from an anonymous author.⁵

She writes, “In the wild, chaotic grief that erupted when my father died, the first task I grappled with was calling his friends and our family members.... My cousin Carrie asked where she could send flowers, and I was so bulldozed by heartbreak I didn't realize the right answer to that question was, ‘Thank you so much, but no flowers.’ Instead, I said the only thing my muddled brain could come up with: I told her [to] send them to Dad's place.

“A couple of days later, when I sat [down] to write [his] obituary, having consulted with my siblings on the topic, I wrote, ‘Flowers gratefully declined.’ But it was too late. Carrie sent an extravagant, gorgeous bouquet of flowers, with a card conveying how much she had loved her Uncle Joe and how much she would miss him.

“By then, my brother had taken all the tables out of Dad's apartment, and the only place I could put the vase of flowers was on a stack of cardboard boxes on the floor, surrounded by other boxes and piles of Dad's stuff that we were sorting through. I spent a week alone in that apartment.... I felt terribly alone in my grief. The days were filled with doings and the phone rang often, but at the end of every day, my siblings went home.... I'd go outside ... [and stand] on the little concrete balcony, ... staring at the ocean and listening to Glen Campbell sing ‘Honey, Come Back’ over and over.... And every time I [went] back into the apartment, Carrie's flowers would catch my eye and tell my broken heart, ‘I care. I'm with you in this crazy grief.’

⁴ Job 2:11-13 (translation based on that of Stephen Levine). Thank you, Rev. Susan Moran!

⁵ Please see commatology.com

“[And so I concluded that] sometimes, in lieu of anything else, send flowers.”⁶

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Beloved spiritual companions, may we
 send flowers,
 sit with those who suffer,
bear witness to the lives of those who have gone before us
 and so make meaning,
 choose purpose,
 open a heart of compassion,
pray for patience and impatience,
 insist on kindness,
 insist on love.

Even in the midst of suffering —
 and especially then —
 let us remember joy.

⁶ commatology.com/index.php/2017/05/in-lieu-of-flowers/