

Suffering: A search for meaning

James E. McGinley
Adjunct Faculty, Northcentral University, USA
jmcginley7@comcast.net

Statement of purpose

In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante laments “In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself within a dark wood, where the straight way was lost.” Like Dante, we also often seek to find our way; to understand our own dark wood. Unfortunately, our path is often blocked. This essay explores such a block to the moral understanding of our lives – suffering. It offers no solution because I believe understanding can only come from within - whether prompted by existential compassion, inexpressible insight, or grace. Fortunately, we are not alone in our search. We can stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, whose literature, philosophies, and experiences both challenge and enrich us. It is upon these luminaries on which this essay builds. The purpose of this essay is not to convince; rather, it is to explore. It accepts our common moral freedom and is an attempt to cast my own weak light onto our universal search for the meaning of suffering within our lives.

Suffering: A search for meaning

There can be no more profound struggle than to understand the meaning of suffering. Can its presence be reconciled with belief in a benevolent God? If not, does its presence, then, give evidence of a universe devoid of meaning, confined to the experience of life as a hazardous and meaningless struggle? The purpose of this essay is not to convince; rather, it is to explore. It accepts our common moral freedom and attempts to cast a weak light onto our universal search for the meaning of suffering within our lives. The struggle is deeply personal but it is not new. It lives on in perpetuity with each man seeking anew to understand. To be convincing its answer, it seems, must always come from within. However, the search is not necessarily a solitary one. We can learn from the worldly and philosophic struggles of others. We can reflect and make personal decisions that can guide us in determining not only the meaning of suffering but how we may live in the world.

Those who have wrestled

C.S. Lewis - Apologist and victim

The ability of suffering to bring man closer to God is a common theme among believers and theologians. In his book *The Problem of Pain* C.S. Lewis provides a wonderful description of man’s natural inclination toward temperamental faith and naive sinfulness. Suffering, it seems, is a necessary tool to bring man consciously closer to God. The ‘terrible necessity of tribulation’ is required to shape man and prevent his unwittingly reversion to his natural and ‘contentedly fallen’ state. Lewis beautifully explains:

I am progressing along the path of life in my ordinarily contentedly fallen and godless condition, absorbed in a merry meeting with my friends for the morrow or a bit of work that tickles my vanity today, a holiday or a new book, when suddenly a stab of abdominal pain that threatens serious disease, or a headline in the newspapers that threatens us all with destruction, sends the whole pack of cards tumbling down. At first I am overwhelmed, and all my little happinesses look like broken toys. Then, slowly and reluctantly, bit by bit, I try to bring myself into the frame of mind that I should be in at all times. I remind myself that all these toys

were never intended to possess my heart, that my true good is in another world and my only real treasure is Christ. And perhaps, by God's grace, I succeed, and for a day or two become a creature consciously dependent on God and drawing its strength from the right sources. But the moment the threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys: I am even anxious, God forgive me, to banish from my mind the only thing that supported me under the threat because it is now associated with the misery of those few days. Thus the terrible necessity of tribulation is only too clear. God has had me for but forty-eight hours and then only by dint of taking everything else away from me. Let Him but sheathe that sword for a moment and I behave like a puppy when the hated bath is over - I shake myself as dry as I can and race off to reacquire my comfortable dirtiness, if not in the nearest manure heap, at least in the nearest flower bed. And that is why tribulations cannot cease until God either sees us remade or sees that our remaking is now hopeless.¹

However, when later faced with the stark reality of human suffering upon the death of his wife due to cancer, Lewis's response lacked the humble piety and calm understanding of this earlier exposition. Two decades after writing *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis's experiences as a witness to his wife's death were chronicled in his book *A Grief Observed*. No longer a detached apologist Lewis's firsthand experience of suffering revealed the power of suffering to create profound doubt. In a protracted outburst of anger Lewis revolts against God, stating: "Sooner or later I must face the question in plain language. What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, 'good'? Doesn't all the *prima facie* evidence suggest exactly the opposite?"² Later, after regaining his sense of emotional equilibrium, Lewis comments that his outcry is less a thought and more a 'yell'. With the passage of time, and the sedative influence of contemplation, Lewis returns to God. With renewed faith he states: "And now that I come to think of it, there's no practical problem before me at all. I know the two great commandments, and I'd better get on with them."³

Harold S. Kushner - The limits of God's power

In 1981 Harold S. Kushner, published a book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* in which he chronicled his spiritual change when faced with the death of his son due to progeria, a disease that results in accelerated aging in children and invariably leads to death. Witnessing the progression of the disease within his child, Kushner faced the challenge of reaching an understanding of his pointless death. Ultimately, Kushner retained his religious faith but found limits to God's power stating that:

I believe in God. But I do not believe the same things about Him that I did years ago, when I was growing up or when I was a theological student. I recognize His limitations. He is limited in what He can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom. I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason.⁴

Citing Emile Durkheim's work, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, as suggesting that the primary purpose of religion at its earliest level was not to put people in touch with God, but rather to put them in touch with one another, Kushner agrees, stating that is what religion today still does best.⁵ For example, when called on the telephone to offer a prayer for a man's mother about to undergo surgery, Kushner agrees to offer the prayer despite his lack of belief that the prayer 'will move God to affect the results of the surgery'.⁶ Instead Kushner offers the prayer as an expression of common humanity, of loving and shared concern, and as a testament to the power of faith to 'redeem people from isolation'.⁷ To Kushner, God's power may be limited by reality but it is not without succor. Kushner clarifies God's contribution when he states: "People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles, any more than

children who pray for bicycles, good grades, or boyfriends get them as a result of praying. But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered.”⁸

Elie Wiesel - Rejection of a silent God

Sent to a Nazi concentration camp with his family at the age of fifteen, Elie Wiesel alone survived to be liberated. A witness to the deepest depths of inhumanity, Wiesel lost faith in a God who responded with silence to the suffering of the faithful. In his book *Night* Wiesel chronicles his experiences and his loss of faith:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.⁹

Wiesel's intimate rejection of God did not lead to a subsequent rejection of man. As chairman of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, Wiesel argued for the establishment of a Holocaust memorial, explaining that there was a 'moral obligation to remember'. And what might be the philosophic rationale behind remembrance? Remembrance has the power to prevent future suffering. According to Wiesel, "Remembering can instill caution, fortify restraint, and protect against future evil or indifference."¹⁰ As a prisoner Wiesel rejected God's silence in the face of suffering, as a messenger he rejects man's silence.

As a response to Wiesel's challenge, Rabbi Benjamin Blech has argued that the Holocaust did not invalidate God; but rather, by demonstrating the destructive power of mankind when morally derailed, it dramatically underlined the contemporary necessity of his teachings. Blech explains:

Jews have been able to maintain their faith because the Holocaust affirmed a fundamental belief of Judaism that makes religion all the more necessary. The Holocaust proved the failure of man, not the failure of God. In giving man free will, the option to do either good or evil, God effectively ties His own hands to prevent humankind from becoming merely puppets. What the world witnessed in the 1940's was how low it could sink when it forsakes ethics and law, and that moral conscience is the greatest gift of the Jews to mankind. Far from delegitimizing God, the Holocaust made clear that without Him and His teachings, the earth could not survive.¹¹

The question of God's silence, then, turns on the question of the nature of his intervention. The teachings of God remain manifest but his willingness to actively interpose himself in worldly affairs remains a question of faith and free will; faith in the sense that some may admit to the active existence of some Godly higher purpose at work that is yet undecipherable by man, free will in the sense that God has given man the capacity to end suffering but will not guarantee it by stripping man of his freedom of choice.

Sin and redemption: A Biblical view

According to the Bible, God is the creator; transcendent and unfathomable. At the burning bush Moses asks God who he shall be called and his reply is "I am that I am".¹² The essential nature of God is to exist, to be present in the universe. Christianity also affirms the ultimate and pervasive goodness of

God. The apostle Paul stated, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."¹³

The Bible lays sin squarely at the feet of man. God provided man paradise as well as freedom and it was man's decision to disobey that brought evil and suffering into the world. After eating forbidden fruit, man achieved knowledge of good and evil and was expelled from paradise. Suffering had entered the world. Ultimately, however, God also provided for the redemption of man through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains the redemptive nature of Christ's sacrifice:

This sacrifice of Christ is unique; it completes and surpasses all other sacrifices. First, it is a gift from God the Father himself, for the Father handed his Son over to sinners in order to reconcile us with himself. At the same time it is the offering of the Son of God made man, who in freedom and love offered his life to his Father through the Holy Spirit in reparation for our disobedience.¹⁴

It was Christ's crucifixion that sanctified worldly suffering. Suffering would no longer exist without meaning because it had been shared by God with man through his incarnate son Jesus Christ. In his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*, Pope John Paul II states, "In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ."¹⁵ The apostle Paul points out that, as people accept Christ within themselves, they will be able to both find and share comfort despite their sufferings:

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, be the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth in Christ.¹⁶

Religious belief, although, is not universal and the lack of its acceptance has many causes. The ultimate truth contained within religion, if extant, is by no means agreed upon. One view is that a lack of faith may be caused by its incomplete understanding. Pascal, the famed seventeenth century mathematician, explains how an incomplete understanding can lead to error:

The Christian religion, then, teaches men these two truths; that there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him. It is equally important to men to know these two points; and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it. The knowledge of only one of these points gives rise either to the pride of philosophers, who have known God, and not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of atheists, who know their own wretchedness, but not the Redeemer.¹⁷

Materialism and impotence: An Atheistic view

In a 1962 speech, Madalyn Murray O'Hair contrasted positivistic atheism against religious idealism and asserted the primacy of the natural over the spiritual. History is a struggle against ignorance and superstition, O'Hair stated, and its meaning is found in a materialistic philosophy:

Modern materialism - or naturalism - is linked with the everyday experience of people. It believes in experiment as the basis of knowledge, and neglects no sphere of reality. It advances itself as an ideological weapon for use in progress. It is in social life that man develops his mind and emotions, will, and conscience, and puts meaning and purpose into life.¹⁸

O'Hair's atheism is rooted in acceptance of natural reality and the denial of the supernatural. But O'Hair does not deny the existence of a higher moral order. Man must seek material progress while being guided by the inspiration of noble ideals that inspire progress.

The positivistic aspect of atheism is counterbalanced by its logical attack on religion. The simplified argument states: If God is all-powerful, seeking only good, then why did he create the possibility for evil, thus allowing suffering to enter the world? If God could, or did not, prevent the occurrence of evil, he is either not all-good or he is not all-powerful. The contrast of a good God against the existence of evil in the world he created is the foundation of the atheistic logical attack. To the atheist, God, if he exists, must be either a masochist, purposefully allowing suffering, or impotent, unable to prevent it.

Causes and consequences

It is painfully obvious that suffering can result from natural causes. On 1 November, 1755 a horrific earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal during the Catholic festival of All Saints Day, a day in which saints and martyrs are honored. Estimated to have approached a rating of 9 on the Richter scale, the disaster killed about 90,000 people out of Lisbon's population of 275,000. Eighty-five percent of Lisbon's buildings were destroyed, including its major churches. Many buildings left undamaged by the earthquake were subsequently destroyed in the tsunami and fires that followed. The prime minister of Portugal, Sebastião de Melo, issued a pragmatic response after the earthquake, saying: "Now? We bury the dead and take care of the living."¹⁹ The earthquake, occurring in a devout Catholic country and Europe's fourth largest city at the time, challenged religious views across Europe. Of what sin were the innocent being punished? Voltaire echoed the collective doubt in his "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster":

*UNHAPPY mortals! Dark and mourning earth!
Affrighted gathering of human kind!
Eternal lingering of useless pain!
Come, ye philosophers, who cry, "All's well,"
And contemplate this ruin of a world.
Behold these shreds and cinders of your race,
This child and mother heaped in common wreck,
These scattered limbs beneath the marble shafts—
A hundred thousand whom the earth devours,
Who, torn and bloody, palpitating yet,
Entombed beneath their hospitable roofs,
In racking torment end their stricken lives.
To those expiring murmurs of distress,
To that appalling spectacle of woe,
Will ye reply: "You do but illustrate
The iron laws that chain the will of God"?
Say ye, o'er that yet quivering mass of flesh:
"God is avenged: the wage of sin is death"?
What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived
That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother's breast?"²⁰*

In addition to nature, suffering can also occur from moral causes; from the action of man against man. History endlessly catalogues man's destructiveness through war, crime, persecution, and all manner of corrosive and petty conflict and competition. As an independent moral agent, man can choose evil over good, although the question of man's inherent bias toward either good or evil remains unresolved. While man's bias towards good and evil remains open to debate, it is certain that man retains free choice and is not forced by nature into either one or the other. Aristotle underlined man's freedom when he argued that moral virtues could not have been implanted by nature since "nothing that exists by nature can be changed by habit."²¹

The highest hurdle - Suffering of the innocent

When searching for the meaning of suffering, one inevitably encounters the suffering of the innocent. While suffering that occurs because it is deserved or suffering that, while onerous to bear, ultimately leads to redemption or growth is understandable. It is the pointless, unredemptive suffering of the innocent that is perhaps the highest hurdle to overcome in attempting to find meaning in suffering.

The story of Job: Price and purpose

One key to the understanding of suffering offered in the Bible is the story of Job. In this illustration, God boasts of Job to Satan, who then challenges the sincerity of Job's faith. God allows a lengthy series of torments to be inflicted on Job, each ultimately failing to shake Job's faith. What could be the meaning of Job's seemingly pointless suffering? What purpose did Job's suffering serve and why was the price of his suffering so high? The answer lies in the example Job provides of faith that is freely given and of faith that is detached from worldly circumstance. Philip Yancy, in his book *Where is God when it hurts?*, explains:

God wants us to choose to love him freely, even when that choice involves pain, because we are committed to him, not to our own good feelings and rewards. He wants us to cleave to him, as Job did, even when we have every reason to deny him hotly. That, I believe, is the central message of Job. Satan had taunted God with the accusation that humans were not truly free. Was Job being faithful simply because God had allowed him a prosperous life? Job's fiery trials proved the answer beyond doubt. Job clung to God's justice when he was the best example in history of God's apparent injustice. He did not seek the Giver because of the gifts; when all gifts were removed he still sought the Giver.²²

Job's faith was strongest because it was given without condition, without reward. However, one is still led to ask, Was Job's suffering necessary or extracted for the idle pride and personal satisfaction of God to prove a point with Satan? This question is perhaps as disturbing as it is unanswerable. Ultimately, it is important that Job's faith and love was freely given. Therein is its most sublime depth; when Job had the least reason to love, he chose to. And, in choosing to love he validated God himself. Nahum N. Glatzer explains:

"Man depends on God for all things; God depends on man for one. Without Man's love God does not exist as God, only as creator, and love is the one thing no one, not even God Himself, can command. It is a free gift or it is nothing. And it is most itself, most free, when it is offered in spite of suffering, of injustice, and of death."²³

Why must the innocent suffer?

Harold Kushner wrestled mightily to understand the suffering of the innocent when faced with the death of his son. Using the Holocaust as an example of suffering, he concluded that he could not make sense of the mass suffering by ascribing it to God's will. No, instead the Holocaust was an offense to God's moral order, brought about by the condition of man being able to choose either good or evil.²⁴ As we have seen, in order to retain his faith Kushner was forced to leave creation in the hands of God and place suffering in the hands of man. Whether this is philosophically satisfying or not is a deeply personal choice. At a minimum this argument leaves God responsible for establishing the conditions for suffering, both capricious and deserved, to exist. One is led to wonder if worldly suffering is an acceptable price for man's freedom.

It is equally difficult to understand the pointless suffering of the innocent in the world that is not caused by man. What is the meaning of suffering that offers no sin, no proof, no healing, and no redemption; that serves only to illustrate the harsh unfairness of the world? When the disciples of Jesus pointed to a man who had been blind from birth and asked Jesus "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?", Jesus replied "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."²⁵ The answer may seem disquieting. Is it true that man must suffer to demonstrate the manifestation of God on earth? Surely God's presence could be

demonstrated without targeting the innocent, through the manifestation of the positive instead of the negative.

In an attempt to focus belief in the most positive direction, religion points to the divine power of grace to bring meaning to suffering. Suffering is meaningful because it was shared by Christ on the cross. Evil and suffering are overcome by grace. The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers the following explanation:

God is infinitely good and all his works are good. Yet no one can escape the experience of suffering or the evils in nature which seem to be linked to the limitations proper to creatures: and above all to the question of moral evil. Where does evil come from? "I sought whence evil comes and there was no solution", said St. Augustine, and his own painful quest would only be resolved by his conversion to the living God. For "the mystery of lawlessness" is clarified only in the light of the "mystery of our religion". The revelation of divine love in Christ manifested at the same time the extent of evil and the superabundance of grace. We must therefore approach the question of the origin of evil by fixing the eyes of our faith on him who alone is its conqueror.²⁶

However convinced one is by the power of God's grace, its power seems to rest in consolation, not explanation. The Catholic Church's position applies best to acceptance only *after* suffering has occurred. God's 'infinite good' and his 'superabundance of grace' do not explain the initial intent and meaning of suffering. Yet still unreconciled are God's 'good' purpose and the meaning of suffering. In this case, despite the assertion of the power of Christ's passion to sanctify, religion's retreat into God's mystery may appear more evasive than definitive.

Yet, despite this elusiveness, religious mystery has a heartening tendency to return to man. In John 15:5 Jesus reminds us that all people compose the bodily church; that He is the vine and we are the branches. He tells us that acceptance, trust, and compassion are not for Him alone. He completes the return to a collective unity between religion and humanity when He addresses a doubtful audience in Matthew 25:35-40:

35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:
36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.
37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed *thee*? or thirsty, and gave *thee* drink?
38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took *thee* in? or naked, and clothed thee?
39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?
40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me.

Like a Mobius strip that turns imperceptibly onto itself, it seems that our actions in the face of suffering can simultaneously repair and reaffirm both human and spiritual dimensions.

Tests and transcendence

The struggle for life produces contests of flesh, will, and spirit. Man triumphs most clearly in victory. But he also has found triumph in endurance, perseverance and, sometimes, in martyrdom. In each case the struggle can be viewed as a test that has the potential to illuminate, to lead to human and spiritual development. Nietzsche famously told us "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger."²⁷ However, suffering also has the power to raise one's consciousness, to focus one's attention on meaning and values. The greatest suffering can perhaps most sharply focus consciousness and lead to the greatest insight. During his struggle with suffering C.S. Lewis proclaimed, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you."²⁸

While meaning can be found through insight it can also be found through the experience of life's journey. Joseph Campbell spent a lifetime studying mythology and uncovered an archetype story of heroic journey common throughout the world. He points out that there are two types of heroic deeds; one physical, where the hero performs a courageous act, and one spiritual, where the hero experiences spirituality beyond the human range.²⁹ In all their forms myths describe a transformative process. Although myths vary in their context, Campbell points out that the ultimate realization of life, expressed through the motif of the hero's journey, is found in transcending oneself. He explains, "If you realize what the real problem is - losing yourself, giving yourself to some higher end, or to another - you realize that this itself is the ultimate trial. When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness."³⁰ Life is man's heroic journey and within it he can find meaning in life that includes suffering. Campbell points out that, "Myths tell us how to confront and bear and interpret suffering, but they do not say that in life there can or should be no suffering."³¹

And what of the man who rejects all meaning of life, who is not satisfied with the acceptance of life's struggles, heroic and otherwise, and his own opportunity and responsibility to find meaning within them? To this man Albert Camus spoke when he wrote, "It was previously a question of finding out whether life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully."³² Camus strips man of any illusions, of any desperate appeals for meaning, but he does not strip him of his consciousness. Even without meaning, man can embrace the reality of his existence in the world.

Denouement: Choice and mystery

It is a fact of nature that human life is finite. In fact, it is the very limitedness of life that brings life's purpose, and the meaning of suffering within it, into question. Purposeless suffering and man's ephemeral existence are poignantly juxtaposed by Carl Sandburg in his poem 'Grass':

*Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work -
I am the grass; I cover all.*

*And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.*

*Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?*

*I am the grass.
Let me work.³³*

However sobering the reality, the existence of suffering and death does not necessarily mandate a denial of the meaning of life. As a human and moral agent man has the power to bring meaning to his own existence through awareness and choice. As a prisoner of four Nazi death camps, including Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl understood the powerlessness of man in the face of insurmountable circumstances. But, he also understood that man still retains his freedom. Frankl writes, "To be sure, a human being is a finite thing, and his freedom is restricted. It is not freedom from conditions, but it is freedom to take a stand toward the conditions."³⁴ Man's freedom lies in his ability to deny circumstances the power to determine who he is. Frankl reminds us:

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we

are no longer able to change a situation - just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer- we are challenged to change ourselves.³⁵

Given the reality of his existence, man has, in fact, no other option but to make his own choices. Man cannot escape this responsibility. Jean-Paul Sartre writes, "Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment he is thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."³⁶ Should man choose submissive withdrawal in the face of life's challenges he is choosing his stand by default. Sartre reminds us that in choosing not to choose we are still making a choice.

Ultimately, man can find meaning in suffering through his response to it. Kushner asked 'Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people?' He tells us in his reply that "the word 'answer' can mean 'response' as well as 'explanation,' and in that sense, there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives."³⁷ Instead of answering with an explanation, man can answer with a response, choosing "to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all."³⁸

In the end, the meaning of suffering may be found more in looking forward, determining belief and action through critical reflection, than in looking backward, seeking an irrefutable and universal purpose. The mystery of life, and each individual's journey through it, is manifest and perhaps unanswerable. Lao Tzu, a Daoist philosopher, put man's power into perspective when he asked "Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?"³⁹ Suffering, like life itself, may be handled best by accepting its mystery while striving to make the best of one's own possibilities. Man cannot change the universe, but he can change himself.

NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, 82.
4. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981), 134.
5. *Ibid.*, 119.
6. *Ibid.*, 121.
7. *Ibid.*
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13. Rom. 8:28 KJV
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24. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981), 82.
25. John 9:2-3 KJV
26. Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd Ed.) See paragraph 385. At http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/ccc_toc2.htm
27. Friedrich Nietzsche. At <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/33943.html>
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