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for Doctoral Candidates*

**Making Space:
Silence, Voice, and Suffering**

MELISSA JOHNSTON-BARRETT

A theology that could wrest land away from the sea of speechless death would be a theology worthy of that name.

—Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*

In his memoir about the unexpected death of his son, Nicholas Wolterstorff writes, “The burial of one’s child is a wrenching alteration of expectations....But it’s more than that. I feel the more but cannot speak it.”¹ His entire book is an attempt to express the intense grief he feels with his son’s passing. But even that many words cannot—and will not—ever express everything that Eric was to him or reach the depths of his pain. Suffering cannot be grasped in words. Suffering is silent.

Although the expression “suffering is silent” has become a modern cliché in many circles, it still expresses one of suffering’s most salient and formidable characteristics—and one not necessarily recognized adequately within the church or theological writings. To recognize the silence of suffering means not falling back on the traditional ways that the church has tried to understand and address suffering.

¹Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 57.

Suffering frequently finds no voice and thus resists meaning. Communities of faith are called to listen carefully to “the silence of suffering,” which will assist sufferers to reclaim their voices and thereby recover their selves. By making a space for suffering in its liturgy and life, the congregation can provide a place where suffering can build community rather than isolating people from one another.

The silence of suffering eludes and questions those who would justify suffering as being aesthetically necessary, a punishment for sin, or a way of building character.² Recognizing the silence of suffering provides a way of responding that does not denigrate the experience of those who suffer. It sits with suffering despite its horror. But, paradoxically, an attempt to understand suffering's silence is simultaneously a careful "listening" to suffering's voice with attention. Listening to the silence of suffering is especially important for the church, a community that regularly accompanies its members (and others) through the valley of the shadow of death.

SUFFERING AND SILENCE

There is no simple definition for suffering, nor—as medical anthropologists Arthur and Joan Kleinman point out—any single definition, despite the fact that suffering is one of the defining qualities of being human.³ Suffering does not have a universal shape, and there is no single way to suffer. Suffering is highly individual, and yet it always occurs in a cultural context. That context affects both how suffering is experienced and how it is expressed.⁴

*“Suffering resists what is necessary for cognition:
language. Therefore, it resists meaning.”*

Scholars acknowledge suffering's elusive character in relation to language. Literary critic and essayist David Morris calls this the “metaphorical silence at the heart of suffering.”⁵ There is a fundamentally nonverbal dimension to suffering, one unable to be captured in any language whatsoever.⁶ Intense suffering, such as life in a concentration camp, the experience of physical torture, the pain of an unrelenting debilitating disease, or episodes of psychotic behavior, give us a sharp portrayal of this phenomenon. Such suffering can cause “an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”⁷ Sufferers may scream, groan, cry, or lash out at others suddenly and irrationally. If slivers of language do escape their lips, the pieces together do not form a coherent, meaningful whole. Some sufferers are simply, literally,

²For a brief explanation of how these traditional ways of “explaining” suffering elude suffering's reality, see Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 19–24, 29–31.

³Arthur and Joan Kleinman, “The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times,” in *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 1–2.

⁴Ibid.

⁵David Morris, “About Suffering: Voice, Genre, and Moral Community,” in Kleinman, Das, and Lock, *Social Suffering*, 27.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 4.

mute. Simone Weil writes of how invisible these people are in society: “We pass quite close to them without realizing it...We only notice that they have rather a strange way of behaving and we censure this behavior.”⁸

But even “less” extreme forms of suffering wreak havoc with language. Those who *are* able to speak (and speak coherently) about their suffering find their words constantly frustrated, because what is felt—bodily, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually—cannot be captured in language. Emmanuel Levinas describes this aspect of suffering as its “unassumability.”⁹ Suffering is experienced in many ways like our other “lived” experiences—experiences, for example, “of color, sound, contact, or any other sensation.”¹⁰ But unlike these experiences, suffering actively resists assumption into our experience—and this resistance is *felt* as resistance. It resists what is necessary for cognition: language. Therefore, it resists meaning. It leaves a void in the middle of the sufferer’s being. Levinas goes so far as to say that this felt void produces a feeling of revulsion in the sufferer. At the very least it causes social and psychological disruption.

Socially, a sufferer will find that her suffering isolates her from others and their experience. Resistant to words and meaning, the void of one’s own suffering is incommunicable to others. Elaine Scarry highlights this social aspect of pain, which is true not only of physical pain, in her groundbreaking book *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World*. She calls this pain’s “unsharability.”¹¹ Resistance to language ensures this unsharability, which not only frustrates the actions of those who want to respond to suffering, but also aids attempts by nonsufferers to ignore or suppress suffering. Doctors try unsuccessful treatment after unsuccessful treatment because they cannot understand the nature of their patients’ pain. Those who work for human rights organizations find that their words thin out and distort the plight of the very people they attempt to represent. Tyrants find it politically convenient that things hard to express through language become almost invisible in the public sphere, and they encourage this phenomenon.

But what may be most painful of all for a sufferer is more personal. He may find that an impenetrable wall has formed itself between him and his loved ones. The inability to share his experience and be understood by those closest to himself isolates him from vital social connections. If he continues to be unable to express his suffering, the wall of isolation will finally fully encircle him, narrowing his world to only his body and his pain.

This isolation from others can have devastating psychological consequences. But the psychological consequences of suffering are not limited to isolation from

⁸Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial, 2000) 68.

⁹Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 91.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4.

others; sufferers also experience a type of isolation from themselves. The void of meaning at the heart of suffering leaves them without the “map” and “destination” formerly used to guide actions in the world.¹² In addition, the felt suffering of the body makes a sufferer’s body “strange” to her.¹³ These two events are not unrelated. Sociologist Arthur Frank points to the desperate need for sufferers to make their bodies “familiar” once again (to “reclaim” their bodies), which is a prerequisite for regaining a sense of direction and meaning in the world. We are “body-selves.” Our body is the ground of our experience of the world. Reclaiming the body is an exercise in reclaiming the “self” and its experience, including its relationship to others.¹⁴

SUFFERING, VOICE, AND STORIES

One can name the recovery of one’s self and one’s experience the reclamation of one’s “voice.” The concept of “voice” has multiple significations; it is both body and mind, both personal and social. Therefore, reclaiming one’s voice is simultaneously a reclaiming of one’s body, mind, desires, and social space of interaction.

“words that emerge from a sufferer can only express themselves as being about the body and its pain rather than of it”

Voice is both mind and body. Frank writes, “Voice speaks the mind and expresses the spirit, but it is also a physical organ of the body.”¹⁵ The *need* for voice originates from the *body* that is suffering. As the body’s need presses the sufferer to speak, the body becomes “simultaneously cause, topic, and instrument” of its speaking. The task for a listener is to “hear” the body in the voice—to listen for the voice of the body (which is the voice of the “void”)—in the pauses and silences between words, in the weeping or screams of agony, or in the mute stares that accompany the clumsy mumbling of those in despair. The listener must listen to these “empty” spaces because any language that does emerge from the sufferer will always misrepresent suffering to a degree. Because suffering cannot be captured in language, listening simply to the words will not grasp the reality of the situation for the sufferer. In fact, simply to listen to the words functions as a type of betrayal of the seriousness of suffering. Words that emerge from a sufferer can only express themselves as being *about* the body and its pain rather than *of* it. It is only in trying to listen for the connection between what is said, who is saying it, and how they are saying it that understanding and (re)connection can take place. This is the ability

¹²Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995) 1.

¹³*Ibid.*, 2. By “felt” suffering I mean both the “felt” lack of meaning (Levinas) and the physical pain that may accompany many types of suffering.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, xii.

to see the voice of the sufferer as one that comes *through* a body.¹⁶ And, as Frank points out, this requires a whole other level of attention.¹⁷

There are two reasons for the need for extra attention. The first is that whatever *is* heard in terms of words may be very hard to understand. Morris reminds us: “Suffering tends to make people inarticulate.”¹⁸ This is true for all the reasons we have specified before in suffering’s relationship to language, but it is also true because people may simply give up trying to communicate when they see that they are continually misunderstood.¹⁹ Staying with a flow of thought or stream of words when they seem completely incoherent or confusing in narrative structure requires extra patience on the part of the listener. In order to hear what *is* being said by the sufferer, the listener must listen not just to the words, but to their very lack of order. Frank gives an example of this type of speech. The speaker’s name is Nancy, a woman suffering from a chronic illness who is also exhausted from living with multiple family problems and a mother who has Alzheimer’s:

And if I’m trying to get dinner ready and I’m already feeling bad, she’s in front of the refrigerator. Then she goes to put her hand on the stove and I got the fire on. And then she’s in front of the silverware drawer. And—and if I send her out she gets mad at me. And then it’s awful. That’s when I have a really, a really bad time.²⁰

In this example, the chaos of the woman’s life is reflected in her narrative. The sense of an “incessant present” pervades the narrative. There is no “narrative sequence.” And her narrative is punctuated throughout with the refrain “and then...and then...and then...,” which Frank likens to a “staccato pacing” of words that “pecks away at the reader just as Nancy’s life pecks away at her.”²¹ The “silence” of Nancy’s suffering is reflected both in the ceaseless “and then” refrains, the words themselves, *and* in the silence of what is left out by her using the “and then” refrain (in place of other transitional or connecting phrases that would confer more meaning on her narrative). It requires extra attention to be able to listen to all of these things at once.

The second reason listening to suffering requires extra attention is because listening to the suffering of others is *painful*. On the most basic level, listening makes the listener aware of the pain of the speaker, something he may have been oblivious to before. In general, human beings seem to shy away both from what is uncomfortable and/or painful. The raw expression of pain in a scream triggers a flinch in the listener that—ever so slightly—causes her to back away emotionally and physically from the speaker. Or a groan may bring forth a slight or severe case of the “revulsion” of which Levinas speaks. In many ways, really listening to those

¹⁶Ibid., 3.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Morris, “About Suffering,” 28.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Frank, *Wounded Storyteller*, 99.

²¹Ibid.

who are suffering is the willingness to enter this space of revulsion. It is the willingness to enter into the uncomfortable, painful, or revolting void that suffering creates. The ability to do this, particularly in cases where the suffering is extreme and has shattered a sufferer's sense of self, Weil likens to a "miracle."²²

"it is only at the threshold of speech that the sufferer can begin to regain a sense of agency and identification with oneself and others"

Yet it is only in the speaking that the beginning of healing takes place. The wall that separates the sufferer from himself and others begins to crumble with the speech that expresses his suffering. Dorothee Soelle notes that healing begins to occur only when suffering is no longer mute, when it has found "a language of lament, of crying, of pain," or, at the very least, has found a language that "says what the situation is."²³ It is only at the threshold of speech that the sufferer can begin to regain a sense of agency and identification with oneself and others. These small steps begin to reconnect the sufferer to others. If she has true listeners, those who are willing to give extra attention to her words, her speech will be particularly fruitful. As Weil says, "Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention."²⁴

One of the most powerful ways sufferers and listeners connect is when the sufferer represents his experience of suffering as a story. Stories are not only composed of words, but also contain connections of meaning that are self-reflective on the part of the sufferer. This begins the restoration of meaning for the sufferer. In suffering, his body had become "strange," his experience foreign, and his relationships strained. Telling stories once again makes the body, experience, and relationships familiar. This is essential to those who have lost their "map" and "destination" in the world. In a real sense, telling stories regains the world for the sufferer.

Telling stories also makes possible a reciprocal relationship with others. Suffering renders its victims passive in many ways. They are used to being cared for by others. Telling stories enables sufferers not only to be cared for by others (because others will be able to understand them better), but also allows them to care for others. Stories of suffering contain vast wisdom, as we see, for instance, in the book of Job. Suffering gives a lens on experience that is true to human life but is not readily available to those not currently in the throes of suffering. Frank records the following from a woman in constant pain:

And all these people in pain...all these people with aches and all these people suffering. We walk in different dimensions. We have access to different experiences,

²²Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," *Waiting for God*, 64.

²³Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 70.

²⁴Weil, "School Studies," 64–65.

different knowledges. And there are so many of us, too. What would happen if we all knew what it really meant and we all lived as if it really mattered, which it does. We could help the normals [non-sufferers] and the whitecoats [doctors] both. We could help them see that they're wasting the precious moments of their lives, if they would look at us who don't have it. I'm convinced that only sick people know what health is. And they know it by its very loss.²⁵

Sufferers care for others in the wisdom they share in their stories. They help others see how precious life is, witness to the reality of pain in human life (a precondition for making practical changes), provide guidance for others who are also suffering, and help caregivers to give better care by providing an understanding of their experience.²⁶ Under the best circumstances, the story of the sufferer functions as a means of empathic bonding between sufferer and listener. Suffering provides the "potency" in the story. It becomes the object of attraction rather than repulsion. Bonds formed in such a way expand as the story of the sufferer is retold by those who first heard the sufferer: "Those who listened then tell others, and the circle of shared experience widens."²⁷ The circle of shared experience expands the community of people who are able to witness to the reality of suffering, who can learn from suffering's wisdom, and who are better able to care for suffering in various forms. Rather than isolating people from one another, suffering can build communities that care for one another.

MAKING A SPACE FOR SUFFERING

How can such communities be achieved? It is difficult both to speak and to hear suffering. Suffering's relationship to language, the elusiveness that renders it virtually "silent," cannot be spoken or "heard" except in ways that recognize the body in pain and its brokenness. In addition, whatever is heard can be so painful that listening to its voice becomes almost unbearable. It is only in practices that embody something like what Simone Weil calls "attention" that suffering may be heard and responded to appropriately.

The first move is one of the heart—a move toward willingness on the part of listeners, both individually and corporately. Those who truly would want to "hear" suffering must be able to approach sufferers in a certain way. This way is akin to Simone Weil's idea of attention. In attention, the soul of the listener "empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, in all his truth."²⁸ This means that preconceived notions move into the background as the sufferer expresses herself. The listener is open to whatever emerges, however it emerges. He asks, "What are you going through?" with mind, heart, and arms wide open. Only this attitude will be able to hear both words and silences. The ability to

²⁵Frank, *Wounded Storyteller*, 141.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 140–141.

²⁷*Ibid.*, xii.

²⁸Weil, "School Studies," 65.

pay attention—to give this extra attention required for those who suffer—is the essence, according to Weil, of love for the neighbor.

Love for our suffering neighbors can be embodied in institutional practices. The church can have “safe” spaces and times for those who must tell their stories (in whatever way is possible for them). The ability to scream, groan, and weep—or even to tell repetitive narratives—should be accommodated, even when it seems inconvenient. This can begin with the pastor, who empties her- or himself of preconceived notions of behavior, explanations, and “remedies” when a sufferer comes to share her pain. The ability to sit with suffering, to recognize how painful it is, and simply to *be* there for whatever emerges from the sufferer (which may only be silence punctuated with tears) is an enormous gift. The simple attention-filled presence of a listener is itself a form of comfort.

*“the ability to pay attention is the essence, according to
Weil, of love for the neighbor”*

This comfort can be extended into liturgy, worship, and church programming. Groups can be trained to “sit” with those who suffer, eager to be with whatever emerges from the sufferer. This can take place in various church fellowship groups, but it can also take place within worship and liturgy. Although liturgy already embodies space for the nonverbal dimensions of suffering through its use of music as well as psalmic language, that is, language in the form of “lament, petition, [and] expression of hope,”²⁹ these spaces must be not only highlighted but also flexible enough to allow for the unexpectedness of the “language” of suffering among participants. This may mean at times putting thoughts of “how it should be done” into the background in order to make space for one who is trying to find a home again in the world. Sufferers must find a way to make this language theirs, and making it theirs may include things that make people uncomfortable. The ability to be able to give this language over to sufferers and sit with it despite the discomfort would be invaluable.

But perhaps the best way to help those who suffer would be to make sure that they are able to tell their own narratives of suffering in both public and private forums, once they are able to do so. One thing that can help encourage this is by emphasizing the many narratives of suffering and faith in the Bible. This aids the acquisition of language to express suffering while also helping to break the hold of isolation that plagues a sufferer. The sufferer gains her own voice while also using the words used by many Christians before her and shared by those around her. But even though the sufferer is connecting himself with a tradition and using language shared by other Christians and those who have suffered before him, each story is told by an individual who will make the story his or her own—and that story itself can be a further means of connection.

²⁹Soelle, *Suffering*, 72.

In *Lament for a Son*, Nicholas Wolterstorff works to find his own voice of suffering in the context of the Christian community. In finding that voice, he becomes a witness to his own pain and connects to others and their pain, giving strength, faith, and comfort—but by means of brokenness, something never forgotten in the book. The Christian community and its Scriptures enable him to find his own voice and help to give him a language for suffering—its brokenness and silence—but they also help him find a language for the resiliency of the broken faith in which he dwells. Of his struggle to address God, Wolterstorff writes:

I must explore The Lament as a mode for my address to God. Psalm 42 is a lament in the context of a faith that endures. Lament and trust are in tension, like wood and string in bow.

My tears have been my food day and
night,

says the songwriter. I remember, he says, how it was when joy was still my lot,
how I used to go with the multitude,
leading the procession to the house of
God,

with shouts of joy and thanksgiving
among the festive throng.

Now it's different. I am downcast, disturbed. Yet I find that faith is not dead. So I
say to myself,

Put your hope in God,
For I will yet praise him,
My Savior and my God.

But then my grief returns and again I lament, to God my Rock:

Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?

Again faith replies:

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

Back and forth, lament and faith, faith and lament, each fastened to the other. A
bruised faith, a longing faith, a faith emptied of nearness:

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living
God.

When can I go and meet with God?

Yet in the distance of endurance I join the song:

By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.³⁰

Wolterstorff reminds us that suffering is not foreign to the human condition nor to

³⁰Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 70–71.

the Christian life. He found his voice among those able to give him attention within his own community and shares that voice with others, widening the circle of witnesses—much as the disciples did when they witnessed to Jesus’s death and resurrection.

After his resurrection, Christ was identified by his wounds. Those wounds were a means to relationship. Our wounds can be the same. Near the end of his lament, Wolterstorff reflects on Christ’s wounds:

The wounds of Christ are his identity. They tell us who he is. He did not lose them. They went down into the grave with him and they came up with him—visible, tangible, palpable. Rising did not remove them. He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds.

To believe in Christ’s rising from the grave is to accept it as a sign of our own rising from our graves. If for each of us it was our destiny to be obliterated, and for all of us together it was our destiny to fade away without a trace, then not Christ’s rising but my dear son’s early dying would be the logo of our fate.

Slowly I begin to see that there is something more as well. To believe in Christ’s rising and death’s dying is also to live with the power and the challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love.³¹

May we all rise like Christ and with Christ through our attention to those who suffer. ⊕

MELISSA JOHNSTON-BARRETT is a PhD candidate in theological studies in the Emory University Graduate Division of Religion. She earned her BA degree in English literature from Clemson University in 1991. She completed an MTS degree at Candler School of Theology in 1997 before entering Emory’s PhD program. While at Emory, she has served as student liaison to the American Academy of Religion and has now been appointed to the AAR Graduate Student Task Force. Johnston-Barrett has reflected on her role as student and parent in her article “Graduate School and Parenting: Learning the Practice of Attention” (Religious Studies News, March 2004, 13).



³¹Ibid., 92.