

Dwelling in the Mourning Space

New Haven Register Faith Matters Column: Winter 2014

Rev. Dr. Susan Fowler

Two years ago, when teachers and staff arrived for work at Sandy Hook Elementary School, they imagined a very ordinary school day before them. They little expected the horror soon to come, nor the extraordinary acts of heroism they would be called upon to perform for those they loved – and which would cost several of them their lives and the lives of the children in their care.

As we tried to make sense of the suffering and evil that visited the good people and children of Newtown that Friday morning, we joined in the lament of those suffering voices of every time and place - of Auschwitz, Syria, Rwanda, West Africa, Central America, New York City, Oklahoma City, Columbine, Newtown, Ferguson (the list grows longer each day) who cry out: “WHY God?” How could you allow such suffering to happen? Why didn’t you do something to stop it?”

Those who suffer know the anguish of cries unheard and wounds left untended; the despairing realization of God’s silence. And we ask: “God, can’t you make your home in a heart that is broken?”

I invite you to dwell with me for a moment in the mourning place where we open ourselves to the big questions and deep feelings that, like suffering, rarely offer answers. We can only enter into their mystery, abandoning ourselves to the experience, holding nothing back. To grieve deeply is to allow our losses to tear apart feelings of security and safety and lead us to the painful truth of our own and the world’s brokenness. The gift of this brokenness is compassion, which opens the inner eye of the heart so that we can stand with the broken-hearted.

While serving as a hospital chaplain, I sat with many whose hearts, minds or bodies were broken and in pain. Yet the person who taught me most powerfully about suffering was a terminal cancer patient named Barbara. In her last year of life, we visited many times during her increasingly more frequent stays in the hospital.

During our final visit, I noticed how fearful she was, struggling with her body’s desire to let go and her sense of not being ready. I tried to comfort her as best I could – putting ice on her parched lips, reading her favorite Scripture passages, stroking her wasted arm, telling her how much she was loved.

Nothing helped – as she became more agitated, I became more frustrated. I pleaded with God to give her some peace in the midst of fear, and to give me what I needed to give her solace. In one moment of pure grace, we both just surrendered – she to the morphine, I to the realization that someone I cared for deeply was dying and in pain and that I was powerless to change that. Only God could ease her suffering. I simply stayed with her and prayed quietly until she slept.

Elie Wiesel, Auschwitz survivor, author and Nobel Peace Prize winner, recounts an experience in the Camp when a young boy was taken to the public gallows and hanged. As the

boy struggled and suffocated, a fellow prisoner asked Wiesel, “Where is your God now?” Wiesel pointed to the boy on the gallows and said, “There.”

Where was my God now? Standing with Barb and me on the hard and holy ground that was her bedside. In the same way that Elie Wiesel stood as sentinel of loving presence at the foot of the gallows, I can understand that God is the fellow sufferer who stands with us in loving presence through those who are present to us in suffering love. The problem of suffering is met not with miracles, but in the response of a community acting as agents of God’s mercy and compassion

To be-with, to suffer with: this is the essence of compassion and the beginning of hope. When people console us in our suffering, stand with us in our struggles, bear witness to our goodness and God’s, we discover something about the transcendent and redemptive quality of suffering: God cannot prevent (nor does God cause) suffering, but suffering can be transformed into compassion, solidarity and a sure hope that God will bind up our wounds and make a home with the brokenhearted.

In the end, there is neither anodyne nor answer for the sufferings we bear as the price of being human and living in a broken world. But as people of faith, we know that suffering is not the end of it. During these coming holidays of joy for many and sadness for some, of celebrations enjoyed and sufferings endured, hold fast to God’s promises of healing, hope and compassionate presence. Embody them in your encounters with others. In this way the wounded spirit is healed, the soul of the world made whole.

Rev. Dr. Susan Fowler serves as a Spiritual Mentor at the Yale Divinity School and as an Adjunct Professor at Quinnipiac University. Your comments are welcome: email susan.fowler@aya.yale.edu