

**“Albert Schweitzer’s Religious Philosophy of Reverence for Life:  
Part VI: The Fellowship of Those Who Bear the Mark of Pain”  
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
Good Friday Service of Meditation  
March 21, 2008, 12 noon  
Rev. Bruce Bode**

**Quotation in Order of Service**

“The Fellowship of those who bear the Mark of Pain. Who are the members of this Fellowship? Those who have learned by experience what physical pain and bodily anguish mean, belong together all the world over; they are united by a secret bond.”

(Albert Schweitzer, On the Edge of the Primeval Forest)

**Welcome**

You have come at this noon-hour to a Good Friday Service of Meditation, a service intended to provide you with an opportunity to drop down and to let the weight of the burdens you so faithfully carry, now carry you into the depths.

Our service draws primarily on Christian traditions, but is aimed at being universal and archetypal ... so that this story from nearly 2000 years ago of the passion and crucifixion of Jeshua ben Joseph, Jesus son of Joseph, is not the story of a given historical person, but rather a story that has become symbol and myth, that is to say, a container, a vessel, for human suffering and sorrow in general.

I will now read selected portions of this story taken from the four biblical Gospels, the intent being to bring to your mind the entire story.

**Contemporary Reading**

These past few weeks in our Sunday services I’ve been speaking about Albert Schweitzer’s religious philosophy, which he named “Reverence for Life,” a religious philosophy that largely originated out of Schweitzer’s acute awareness of the physical suffering and pain that afflicts our world and his desire to bring some relief for that suffering and pain.

So it was that, at the age of thirty, Schweitzer decided to leave the academic world – this to the shock and dismay of his family and friends, for he already made ground-breaking contributions in three different disciplines: theology, philosophy, and music. He decided to leave that academic world and the world of the arts to become a medical doctor so that he could bring modern medicine to Equatorial Africa and so relieve suffering in a very direct way.

My contemporary reading for this Good Friday Service is an account by Schweitzer of some of his medical work after he had been in Africa for a couple of years. And the line that really catches me in this reading is his statement that “Pain is a more terrible lord of mankind than death himself.”

This reading is from his book, On the Edge of the Primeval Forest, first published in 1922, though this piece is written some years before that.

As to operations, one undertakes, naturally, in the forest, only such as are urgent and which promise a successful result. The one I have had to perform oftenest is that for hernia, a thing which afflicts the negroes of Central Africa much more than it does white people, though why this should be so we do not know. They also suffer much oftener than white people from strangulated hernia, in which the intestine becomes constricted and blocked, so that it can no longer empty itself. It then becomes enormously inflated by the gases which form, and this causes terrible pain. Than after several days of torture death takes place, unless the intestine can be got back through the rupture into the abdomen.... In Africa this terrible death is quite common. There are few negroes who have not as boys seen some man rolling in the sand of his hut and howling with agony till death came to release him. So now, the moment a man feels that his rupture is a strangulated one – rupture is far rarer among women – he gets his friends to put him in a canoe and bring him to me.

How can I describe my feelings when a poor fellow is brought me in this condition? I am the only person within hundreds of miles who can help him. Because I am here and am supplied by my friends with the necessary means, he can be saved, like those who came before him in the same condition and those who will come after him, while otherwise he would have fallen a victim to the torture. This does not mean merely that I can save life. We must all die. But that I can save him from days

of torture, that is what I feel as my great and ever new privilege. Pain is a more terrible lord of mankind than death himself.

So, when the poor, moaning creature comes, I lay my hand on this forehead and say to him: "Don't be afraid! In an hour's time you shall be put to sleep, and when you wake you won't feel any more pain." Very soon he is given an injection of omnipon; the doctor's wife is called to the hospital, and, with Joseph's help, makes everything ready for the operation. When that is to begin she administers the anaesthetic, and Joseph, in a long pair of rubber gloves, acts as assistant.

The operation is finished, and in the hardly-lighted dormitory I watch for the sick man's awaking. Scarcely has he recovered consciousness when he stares about him and exclaims again and again: "I've no more pain! I've no more pain! ... His hand feels for mine and will not let go.

(On the Edge of the Primeval Forest & More from the Primeval Forest, pp. 62-63)

### **Prayer & Period of Silence**

In this time of quiet, of inwardness, of meditation, and prayer, we reflect on the dual nature of the reality that is our world, the intermingling of light and dark, of joy and sorrow, of peace and pain.

Typically, we try to stay on the light, joyful, and peaceful side of reality; but today, at this noon hour, we let ourselves sink into the depths. We give ourselves permission in this sanctuary of the spirit to feel the sorrow, suffering, pain, and violence that are so abundantly present in our world.

Today we would let the dark be dark, the sorrow be sorrow, and the pain be pain. No attempt today to inject light into dark, or to bring joy out of sorrow, or to administer balm to pain.

Today, and at this hour, we allow ourselves to walk in the valley. We linger under the shadow of death and acquaint ourselves with grief. We admit how our spirits thirst. With the poet we cry:

All my cells

are open and all  
are thirsty, I ache and swell

in a hundred places, but mostly  
in the middle of my heart.

(Ranier Maria Rilke, Rilke's Book of Hours, p. 69)

### **“THE FELLOWSHIP OF THOSE WHO BEAR THE MARK OF PAIN”**

Like the Buddha, whose first truth of his Four Noble Truths was the statement that “All life is suffering” (*dukkha*), so, too, Albert Schweitzer was moved, even from his youth, by the suffering of the world – and not only human suffering but also the suffering of other life as well. In a small classic on childhood, a book titled Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, Schweitzer says:

As far back as I can remember, I was saddened by the amount of misery I saw in the world around me. Youth’s unqualified *joie de vivre* [“joy of living”] I never really knew, and I believe that to be the case with many children, even though they appear outwardly merry and quite free from care.

One thing that specially saddened me was that the unfortunate animals had to suffer so much pain and misery. The sight of an old limping horse, tugged forward by one man while another kept beating it with a stick to get it to the knacker’s yard at Colmar, haunted me for weeks.

It was quite incomprehensible to me – this was before I began going to school – why in my evening prayers I should pray for human beings only. So when my mother had prayed with me and had kissed me good-night, I used to add silently a prayer that I had composed myself for all living creatures. It ran thus: “O heavenly Father, protect and bless all things that have breath; guard them from all evil, and let them sleep in peace.”

(Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, pp. 27-28)

Thus, Schweitzer felt keenly the dual nature of this unfathomable reality in which we find ourselves in – its glory and its beauty, its agony and its misery all mixed in and mixed up together. “What is full of meaning within

the meaningless, the meaningless within what is full of meaning: that is the essential nature of the universe,” said Schweitzer.

In 1918, in Africa, Schweitzer came one day to the huts of an abandoned African laborer’s camp on the western coast by the mouth of the Ogowe River.

...I went to see whether there was any one in them, but no one answered my calls. Then I opened the doors one by one, and in the last hut saw a man lying on the ground with his head almost buried in the sand and with ants running all over him. It was a victim of sleeping-sickness whom his companions had left there, probably some days before, because they could not take him any further. He was past all help, though he still breathed. While I was busied with him I could see through the door of the hut the bright blue waters of the bay in their frame of green woods, a scene of almost magic beauty, looking still more enchanting in the flood of golden light poured over it by the setting sun. To be shown in a single glance such a paradise and such helpless, hopeless misery, was overwhelming....

(On the Edge of the Primeval Forest & More from the Primeval Forest, p. 113)

Philosophically, Schweitzer was never able to reconcile and bring together the dual nature of reality; he thought, actually, it was a diminishment of our humanity to do so. He says:

Even as a boy in school it was clear to me that no explanation of the evil in the world could ever satisfy me; all explanations, I felt, ended in sophistries and at bottom had no other object than to make it possible for humans to share in the misery around them with less keen feelings. That a thinker like Leibnitz could reach the miserable conclusion that though this world is, indeed, not good, it is the best that was possible, I have never been able to understand.

(Out of My Life and Thought, p. 240)

Part of our human task, Schweitzer believed, is for a person to take one’s part in bearing the load of suffering that lays upon the world, and to try, to whatever extent one can, to heal this split that we experience in our world.

Thus, if the fates have smiled upon you and have blessed you with health, happiness, and good fortune, you are not to take these for granted. You are not free just to live as you might please. We are connected to each other, we depend upon each other, and ultimately life is of one piece. And because that is so we have an obligation to reach out to those who are not as blessed we might be. Again, from Schweitzer's Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, we read:

The thought that I had been granted such a specially happy youth was ever in my mind; I felt it even as something oppressive, and ever more clearly there presented itself to me the question whether this happiness was a thing that I might accept as a matter of course. Here, then, was the second great experience of my life, namely, this question about the right to happiness. As an experience it joined itself to that other [great experience] which had accompanied me from my childhood up; I mean my deep sympathy with the pain which prevails in the world around us. These two experiences slowly melted into one another, and thence came definiteness to my interpretation of life as a whole, and a decision as to the future of my own life in particular.

It became steadily clearer to me that I had not the inward right to take as a matter of course my happy youth, my good health, and my power of work. Out of the depths of my feeling of happiness there grew up gradually within me an understanding of the saying of Jesus that we must not treat our lives as being for ourselves alone. Whoever is spared personal pain must feel himself or herself called to help in diminishing the pain of others. We must all carry our share of the misery which lies upon the world.

(Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, pp. 60-61, adjusted for gender)

Again, later in life, Schweitzer wrote:

From the community of suffering I have never tried to withdraw myself. It seemed to me a matter of course that we should all take our share of the burden of pain which lies upon the world.

(Out of My Life and Thought, p. 240)

And so it was that Schweitzer felt it was actually a privilege to be in a position to help others. He did not regard his going to Africa as medical doctor to set up a hospital there as an act of heroism. “There are no heroes of action,” he writes, “only heroes of renunciation” – that is, those who because of their life circumstances are not able give to the world in the way they might like. “Of such,” he says, “there are plenty. But few of them are known, and even these not to the crowd, but to the few.” (Out of My Life and Thought, p. 91)

And so it is that, as Jesus has said (and Jesus remained for Schweitzer his spiritual master throughout his life): “To whom much is given, much is required. (Luke 12:48) And also this: “Whosoever would save his life will lose it; and whosoever would lose his life [that is, give it in service to life] will save it.” (Luke 9:24)

Now I wish to conclude with the concept that is related to the title of my reflection on this Good Friday, namely, Schweitzer’s concept of “The Fellowship of Those Who Bear the Mark of Pain.”

This is the idea that if you have experienced pain – physical pain, suffering, and torment – you are united in a secret fellowship with all others, the world over, who have had the same experience of pain.

And, secondly, if you have been delivered from such pain, you now are under an obligation to assist others who are presently in pain.

Here is what Schweitzer writes from the African rain forest:

The Fellowship of Those Who Bear the Mark of Pain. Who are the members of this fellowship?

Those who have learned by experience what physical pain and bodily anguish mean belong together all the world over; they are united by a secret bond. One and all they know the horrors of suffering to which humans can be exposed, and one and all they know the longing to be free from pain.

The one who has been delivered from pain must not think he or she is now free again, and at liberty to take life up just as it was before, entirely forgetful of the past. Such a person is now "one whose eyes are open" with regard to pain and anguish, and he or she must help to

overcome those two enemies (as far as human power can control them) and bring to others the deliverance which he or she has enjoyed.

The person who, with a doctor's help, has been pulled through a severe illness, must aid in providing a helper such as he or she had, for those who otherwise could not have one.

The one who has been saved by an operation from death or torturing pain, must do his or her part to make it possible for the kindly anesthetic and the helpful knife to begin their work, where death and torturing pain still rule unhindered.

The mother who owes it to medical aid that her child still belongs to her, and not to the cold earth, must help, so that the poor mother who has never seen a doctor may be spared what she has been spared.

Where a man's death agony might have been terrible, but could fortunately be made tolerable by a doctor's skill, those who stood around his deathbed must help, that others, too, may enjoy that same consolation when they lose their dear ones.

Such is the Fellowship of those who bear the Mark of Pain....

(On the Edge of the Primeval Forest & More from the Primeval Forest, p. 116-117, adjusted for gender)

Our congregation has named itself a Fellowship, and wishes to preserve that designation. Part of the reason for that, I trust, is that we wish to be united with others in sharing, in carrying, and in lifting the burden of pain, both physical and emotional, that dwells within this community and beyond.

On this Good Friday, as we reflect on the suffering of the world, may we be strengthened in our resolve to be a Fellowship of those who willingly bear our portion of the pain of this world.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the Good Friday sermon given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on March 21, 2008. This sermon, "The Fellowship of Those Who Bear the Mark of Pain" is the sixth of seven planned on "Albert Schweitzer's Religious Philosophy of 'Reverence for Life.'" The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)