

Don't Waste Your Suffering

The famous German-language poet Rainer Maria Rilke said "Don't waste your suffering." If you took away his demons, he insisted, you also took away his angels. He wanted both. He wanted to be seen as a three-dimensional being, full and complete, with all his parts accepted unconditionally. Pain and suffering were not his enemies. Instead, they helped define him.

Rilke would have looked curiously upon our modern age.

Pain relievers. Opioids. Alcohol. Marijuana. These are all popular substances used to deaden pain, something needed by far too many in a world of dissociation and distraction.

Why are they so common? Because we typically view pain and suffering as experiences to run away from, deny, even destroy. This is unfortunate. The western model tells us everything in life is accidental, pure happenstance, that we don't have to look at the greater meaning of our experiences.

Eastern wisdom, by contrast, tells us that "Failure is an opportunity." The same can be said for our suffering. Pain and suffering can be useful tools for insight and, indeed, one of our greatest opportunities for growth.

In fact, there's great wisdom in suffering and illness. The famous Zen philosopher Suzuki Roshi, who helped popularize Zen in the United States through his writings and three California retreat centers, describes a bad cold he suffered in his book "Is That So?". Suddenly realizing he was a Zen practitioner, and that "sickness" was largely a result of perception, he caught himself and simply began observing the experience. His "suffering" quickly transformed into a rather enjoyable act. He could observe it without judgment or labeling it "good" or "bad."

The same can be said of our own suffering. The modern world has demonized suffering, turning it into something that must be overcome or eliminated. The first step in most physical or psychological treatment is to

deaden our pain. Today's narrow bio-psychiatric model sees suffering as something to be eliminated. Suffering is simply not allowed.

Do we demonize the pain we feel when we cut our finger? No, the pain is merely a signal to take care of our body. There is no judge that calls our pain "good" or "bad" or gives it an Olympic score. Those labels are merely social constructs. Instead, we can decide how we define, react and learn from pain.

While we've made pain and suffering a pathology, the original meaning of the word "pathology" is much more intriguing: *the study of suffering*.

Suffering is also the groundwork for eldership. It offers us deep insights into our own lives, how to change course and deepen our experiences. Through time we realize there is wisdom in both aging and suffering.

Take, for example, an executive who loses his job after 35 years. The layoff is devastating and threatens everything he values: money, acclaim, comfort, security. He slips into a deep depression because everything he has considered valuable in life has been taken away. Yet this depression is not necessarily bad. It's simply the body speaking its mind, talking in the only way it can, expressing its sorrow.

Today's bio-psychiatric view of depression would sedate and suppress his despair. But his depression is calling out for him to pay attention, allow this loss and — perhaps — see it as a sign to change course.

Instead of taking anti-depressants, this executive decides to pursue a dream he's put on hold for 35 years. He has always wanted to be a history teacher, and takes classes at the local college to gain his teaching credential. Almost immediately he becomes a substitute teacher and is filled with joy. Soon after he gets a job teaching at the local high school where his kids once went to school. He is happier than he's ever been in his life.

I've always felt deeply connected to my own suffering, and I never wanted that to be "wrong." When I am forgetful, I don't chastize myself. Instead, I let go of judgment and self-criticism, both of which are products of our ego. If I

fell and broke my leg instead of lamenting all the things I couldn't do, I'd just kick back and enjoy reading or watching "Breaking Bad" on Netflix.

In a greater sense, the steady loss of eyesight, hearing and cognitive skills has a deeper meaning. Instead of fretting and gnashing our teeth about this natural evolution, it offers us a doorway to the internal world of deeper meaning. We can choose either to walk through this door and explore this new world, or stand outside and stomp our feet.

Alzheimer's disease is considered a scourge and the greatest fear of the aging process. But what if we simply accepted it as natural to the aging process? If we no longer viewed it as a disease, "Alzheimer's disease" would cease to exist.

I wrote "The Ambiguity of Suffering" to explore the confusion we often feel when faced with sorrow.

First and foremost, I don't intend to minimize or dismiss the pain of intense suffering like torture, starvation, or extreme physical injuries. These are all conditions that should be treated and relieved immediately.

Yet with suffering of other types - depression, anxiety, even lesser physical ailments — rather than viewing these events as accidental or in terms of good or bad, this suffering often has meaning and purpose.

The importance of this shift can't be stressed enough. When events provide meaning, they promote within us curiosity and a desire for deeper understanding. This why suffering is ambiguous. On the surface it is deeply painful. Yet underneath lies a treasure trove of meaning. Our suffering often asks for it to be seen and explored as important to understanding our unconscious desires or living life to the fullest.

If we can view suffering without judgment - outside the worlds of good and bad, positive or negative — it becomes another life lesson, albeit an important one. Suffering can become a springboard to increased awareness,

helping us connect with the world as we re-evaluate our hopes, dreams, wishes and goals.