From survival to love: Evolution and the problem of suffering

by Bethany Sollereder in the September 17, 2014 issue

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The world watches in horror as rebel extremists surge across Iraq. Videos graphically depict the daily violence in Syria. Closer to home, yet another gunman has razed innocent victims in a public place. Behind closed doors, domestic abuse abounds—incidents per year in the United States alone are estimated at over 960,000.

How can we possibly think that a God of love has created this violent, hatred-filled world? It is one of the hardest questions Christians face.

I did not expect to find an answer to this question when I first came across Andrew Elphinstone's book *Freedom, Suffering and Love*. Elphinstone was an aristocratic clergyman trained at Eton and Oxford. Queen Elizabeth was a bridesmaid at his wedding. What could this entitled man have to say to about violence and injustice?

But it turns out that his essay on love and suffering—which combines insights from evolutionary biology, psychology, theology, and spirituality—speaks of the complexities of the human heart with incredible force while remaining almost entirely jargon free. *Freedom, Suffering and Love* was published posthumously from the author's notes in 1976 and promptly forgotten.

Why does a world created by the God of love contain so much suffering and unrest? Elphinstone's answer links the evolutionary process, with all its ruthless violence and competitiveness, to the process of love as it is formed in the human heart. He shows that "the present primacy of pain and unrest in the world is part of the raw material

of the ultimate primacy of love.”

How can this be? First, he argues that the processes of physical and spiritual formation are analogous. The physical world is shaped by cataclysmic forces. Volcanoes, earthquakes, and meteorites shape the earth’s development. (The crustal plate slippage in 2004 that caused the Indian Ocean tsunami released more energy than 20,000 atomic bombs, and it was just one of countless formative events in earth history.) “By analogy,” Elphinstone writes, “the forming of a human personality, from smallest biological origin to something sufficiently splendid to be what religions call Godlikeness, must be of still more formidable creative significance. What we are ourselves seeing and taking part in is the continuing act of God’s creation, no longer at a physical level but at a spiritual, of which the raw materials are the more vulnerable and explosive ones of human feeling, thought, emotion, and will.”

For Elphinstone, the ubiquitous demonstrations in humans of selfishness and violence are not evidence of a world gone wrong; rather, they show the human person ripe for radical transformation. The passions produced by evolution are the raw ingredients of love, awaiting “divine alchemy.” Love is not the opposite of aggression, or joy the opposite of rage. Rather, love and joy are the transmuted forms of aggression and rage. And the process of change from explosive anger to transformed love is slow and precarious. “There need be no surprises if this phase of creation, not now in the making of inanimate rock, ocean or hill, but of men and women striving towards their completion, is also, and even more, turbulent and restless.”

Part of the reason for this turbulence is the primacy of pain in the process. Human aggression and self-defensiveness are rooted in response to pain, or in the effort to avoid it. When hurt, we retaliate. When threatened, we bare tooth and claw. In evolutionary development, these responses were necessary to survival.

But now that humanity is called into the role of being the image and likeness of God, a new law prevails. Love must now predominate over our evolutionary instincts, and our response to pain is the hinge point in that change. Forgiveness is the radical response that catalyzes change.

Second, Elphinstone argues that we need to revise our narrative of human origins in light of evolution. In the way the story is often told, Adam and Eve were created as

perfectly moral and perfectly rational beings. Love was part of their makeup from the start. Then, in an incoherent and unanticipated act of sin, they plunged from the height of original perfection into the world of sin, temptation, and violence that we know today.

Elphinstone would revise this narrative this way: in place of a perfect couple in a pleasant garden, our nonhuman ancestors were engaged in a long struggle for survival. They moved sharply in response to pain, they were protective of their own and aggressive toward perceived threats. Love was totally absent among them. They had skill, strength, intelligence, even altruism, but not love. Love is a uniquely human attribute—or perhaps we should say it is a divine attribute, imparted to humanity—that transcends the evolutionary process and shapes us into hybrids of earthly and heavenly forms. Somewhere along the evolutionary process, nascent humanity acquired the ability to exercise a moral will over our innate desires, and with that came the capacity both to sin and to receive divine love and make it our own.

When we think of humans created in a moment by divine fiat, we overlook what a mighty achievement it is to love. In evolutionary terms, love is the very latest addition to life. It took countless millennia to arrive at love, and we stand only on the brink of its emergence. Every journey into new environments has come with massive struggle and great cost. Transformation into the realm of love is no exception.

The evolutionary process, however, is not enough on its own to develop the rare jewel of love. Evolution can only form passions for survival—all the violent, aggressive, and even cooperative and tender passions. The existence of these passions is absolutely necessary to God’s work. To reconstruct these into love is the work of God, and God’s workshop is the human heart.

Imagine drinking a pint of beer. Not an insipid mass-produced lager, but a rich, full-bodied craft ale, hand-pumped from the cask. Or, if beer is not your thing, visualize a warm loaf of bread just pulled from the oven: the crisp, lightly browned crust tearing to reveal the soft, nutty insides; the aroma wafting up as you raise it to your mouth. We enjoy these experiences, yet none of us would enjoy the raw materials of grain, hops, yeast, and salt if they were set before us in that form. The processes of fermentation in beer and baking in bread transform the unsavory ingredients into mouth-watering food. At the same time, the desired result would be impossible without the existence of the raw materials. You cannot have sweet beer without

bitter hops. You cannot have rich-tasting bread without sharp salt. Likewise, you cannot, according to Elphinstone, have the joy of love without the rage of hate. We therefore cannot object to God's goodness when we see around us a world of violence. This is the means to produce love.

Bread and beer are not found in nature. It takes a further work of human culture and labor to produce them. When we look at the evolutionary process, we are taken aback by its ruthless suffering. Darwin famously exclaimed, "What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel works of nature!" In all this mess, why is there no reflection of God's love? Why, a person might ask walking through a vast prairie, is there no bread anywhere? But take a baker to a field of wheat and she will see the potential for something quite different. We look at a world of violence and wonder where God is. God looks at a world full of unformed passions and sees the seeds of the kingdom.

Elphinstone's approach explains another rather startling reality: those we love most are often also the targets of our most severe hatred and rage. These forces—love and rage—are the same basic substance of passion; they seem just a hairsbreadth apart. It is because anger is in the precarious process of being transmuted into love that the two flash up almost simultaneously inside us. They lie next to each other in the soul and are powered by the same energy. Both are at work pulling our hearts toward opposite actions in a battle for the self.

Thomas Merton once said, "To be a saint is to be myself." Spiritual writers often speak about dropping the false self and allowing the true self to emerge. This imagery of the false self as a mask or a shell is sometimes appropriate, since we can disguise ourselves to please others—to show what they demand in order not to be rejected or to avoid pain. But the picture might also imply that when we get behind the false selves, when we take off the masks, we will find a good—if perhaps injured—self. When we look inside ourselves and find not a cringing child but a gale-force whirlwind of tangled desires, we quickly shut the door again and pretend we never looked.

Elphinstone's approach explains this unsettling discovery. We do not find the true self behind our false selves. When we get below the masks, we find the primal, raw materials of a true person. We go looking for bread and get a mouthful of flour and salt.

We still build false selves, of course, but they do not always resemble masks. The barrier between our untransformed self and others is more like the type of enclosure gates around the velociraptor pen in the film *Jurassic Park*. It exists to keep others safe from the devouring and dangerous passions inside. Even we ourselves can be terrified by the volatile and uncontrollable strength of the untransformed inner self.

Nor are the powers of the inner self left unguided or undirected. The untransmuted self has had 3.5 billion years of evolutionary training to sharpen its skills of self-preservation, to build its strength, to learn its perilous cunning. This self is not evil (evil, like love, is a formed moral attribute), but she is a keen and powerful survivalist. When our small rational self stands in front of this roaring ocean, it is easily overpowered, tossed like so much driftwood in a storm. We find ourselves doing what we do not want to do, and not doing what we want to do. After several painful encounters, after we scrape ourselves wounded from the floor when the attack of passions has subsided, we begin to build yet higher barriers to keep others away.

It is not always out of shame, or to avoid being hurt oneself, but out of a desire to protect others from this raw self, as an act of compassion for a world that is already suffering. Once the wall is built, the imprisoned inner self reacts like any neglected thing: it attempts more and more aggressively to get out, desperate for the freedom and nurture that is its life, becoming even more unruly and unpredictable, or it quietly goes into a deathlike coma. The latter case is sometimes the more difficult, because it is more likely that the person will begin to confuse the façade for the reality, since there is no more noise or disruption from within. In this case, life is lived controlled and passionless, more machine than human. In the former case, anger and desperation erupt without any hope of control. We live afraid of our desires and increasingly distance ourselves from others—for who would face the danger of engaging this feral self?

Bleak as it may seem, there is good news in all of this: the strength of the untransformed self is directly correlated with the capacity for love in the new self. If the passions with which evolution had endowed us were meager and mild, then our love would be pale and weak. Because our untrained desires are almost unimaginably strong, we have the realistic hope that our love—once emerged—will be as strong as death, which many waters cannot quench nor floods drown (Song of Songs 8:6–7).

There remain three choices. The first option is to return harm for harm, to proliferate pain in the world by indulging in every petty act of revenge or cruelty. In this case, the natural human propensity for aggressive passion turns to evil through the catalyst of the human will. (In Elphinstone's thought, it is the devil who pulls those natural desires toward evil. I don't deny that option entirely, but I think the human will can be drawn to evil easily enough on its own.)

Or second, we can hide our passions, beat them down, deny them, suppress them, jail them. We can cover our strong emotions with masks of rationality, trading our humanity for the certainty of cold logic. We will refuse to see others' true selves and leave others blind to ours. The inner person is never transformed and remains untrusted.

Or third, we can take the terrible risk of accepting our passions and allowing God to do the work of transmuting them into the love and joy that properly forms the human soul. The key to this transmutation is forgiveness.

"Forgiveness," writes Elphinstone, "is specifically a matter of dealing with pain." Forgiveness is the choice to accept pain inflicted by another and to refuse to return that pain upon the perpetrator. It is a choice to end the cycle of violence and the spread of hurt. It comes only at a great cost. If someone hurts us and we hurt them back, we feel vindicated. We have, following our evolutionary impulses, reminded them of the cost of meddling with us, thus protecting ourselves against future harm from the same quarter.

To refuse to return harm for harm works against our natural instincts. Every evolutionary nerve screams to flee or to fight. It is much easier to react to pain with anger and aggressiveness. But love's endeavor is to approach pain head-on, to stand against it, and to remain undeterred through it. By going through the process of pain, love opens up a new option of finding healing, and turning the pain from the agent of evil to the use of good.

Elphinstone's approach does not solve pain. The practice of love does not remove pain from one's life, or protect one from its hurt. Indeed, sometimes the choice to forgive will mean that we will suffer more, because we will not experience the relief of revenge. What love can do is stop the proliferation of evil and therefore the spread of pain beyond oneself. Instead of returning hurt for hurt, love absorbs the hurt and returns good. Far from protecting or eliminating pain from the life of the

lover, the response of love can leave one terribly vulnerable.

One is not left defenseless, however, because although it may not initially seem so, the power of forgiveness is powerfully compelling to the forgiven. Let a person know that they are truly forgiven, and a whole lifetime of change may not pay the debt of gratitude. In this exchange of forgiveness, the lover is transformed away from the natural instinct to hurt and becomes more Christlike. Meanwhile, the forgiven is either transformed by the touch of grace or, at the very least, not provoked into any further action by receiving fresh violence.

Elphinstone's insight also casts new light on the traditional narratives of sin, salvation, and redemption. Seen in light of evolution, the event of Jesus on the cross comes into sharper focus. What did Jesus do in that momentous act? He took the full painful consequences of the evolutionary journey in which humans were, by necessity, emerged. He embraced the vulnerability of love, absorbed every pain that evil and human cruelty could muster, and he chose forgiveness. By this choice, he conquered the desires that in humans had been turned to evil. If humans were not in a muddle because of a sin in the Garden of Eden, they were still hopelessly bound to the strong impulses that overwhelmed their ability to turn pain and its consequent passions into love.

Jesus on the cross, to borrow an analogy from Paul Fiddes, became like the first man to scale a previously impassable mountain path. Once the terrain was traversed and conquered, Christ became the guide for all who would follow him. He made a way where there was none, and his Spirit continues that work today. Christians must now take up their cross and follow Jesus in the same path of sacrificial love.

From this evolutionary perspective, the ubiquity of pain in the world is not an argument against the love or goodness of God. Rather, it is the key to understanding our high calling of love. When we are in pain, more than any other moment, our passions are invoked and shaped. When our pain leads us to violence, hate, or revenge, our desires turn to evil. If instead, in the moment of pain, we choose to forgive, the power of pain is broken. It is not passed on in aggression or turned upon the self in shame. Forgiveness is the ultimate defeat of evil and freedom from it. While we may still be in pain, we may also find joy in the transformation of love. There is redemption in finding that without retaliation we can relinquish the role of victim and become the victor. The pain of the transformation is correlated with the joy that comes with the new power of love and the possibility of healing, both for

oneself and for the broken relationship.

The path of love is a longer, harder road than the simple one of survival called for by evolution. Think of a grain of wheat on an evolutionary path: it simply falls to the ground and dies. The grain chosen to be bread, however, has a much more arduous path. It must be cut, threshed, ground, kneaded, and placed in the fire before its final transformation. Love is the gift of divine grace in our life, but no path is harder than the path of true love. It “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). The love that will not bear pain is no love at all, and forgiveness where no pain has been suffered is not forgiveness.

It is not often that the study of biology leads to deep spiritual insight. But Elphinstone shows us how the evolutionary narrative works not against but with the Christian narrative of redemption. In light of evolution, the existence of violence and hatred in the world appears not as an insoluble theological riddle but the outcome of a long and necessary process that is still in development. The bitter raw products of evolution are slowly being brought to transcend evolution itself. We are, through the painful process of forgiveness, being transformed into the image and likeness of Christ.