

Hope for hurting bodies: Making sense of chronic pain

The story goes that God got a body. I've often pondered the relationship between incarnation and pain.

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Christ Child, stone sculpture by Mike Chapman, outside St. Martins-in-the-Fields, London. [Some rights reserved](#) by [dino_b](#).

Years ago, I encountered a graphic crucifix in an old Mexican church. It was too kitschy to elicit holy horror; the gashes on Christ's face and body looked more cartoonish than redemptive. I am glad I never pushed the image from my mind, though. It has become for me a sort of icon of the banality of pain—even divine pain. For all the competing theories of atonement, there is a singular fact about the crucifixion: it hurt like hell.

I was still in elementary school the first time I woke up with a stiff neck, and I have grappled with bouts of severe neck and back pain ever since. When I was 22, a chiropractor glanced at my X-ray and told me I had the spine of a middle-aged man. I've sprained my back by carrying an amplifier and lifting a canoe. I've suffered through postpartum spasms that were worse than actual childbirth. Once I ended up on bed rest for days because I sneezed wrong. I've seen physical therapists and pain specialists, gotten monthly massages and an inconclusive MRI. I've swallowed painkillers so strong I couldn't hold them down, and I've fretted about whether doctors will think I'm an addict if I appear too desperate for Demerol.

In her classic essay on migraines—another excruciating and mysterious affliction—Joan Didion remarks, “That no one dies of migraine seems, to someone deep into an attack, an ambiguous blessing.” There have been times when I could almost consent to this terrible sentiment. When the pain comes, the only thing I want—the only thing I am capable of wanting, it seems—is for it to leave.

“Whatever else it does,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “pain offers an experience of being human that is as elemental as birth, orgasm, love, and death.” For this reason I’ve often pondered—not in the throes of spasms, but before the last twinges have faded away—the relationship between pain and incarnation. The story goes that God got a body, a body that grew in a mother’s womb and suckled at a mother’s breast. The body of a boy: a boy who skinned his knees and got too much sun and went through puberty. The body of a man: a man who knew the pleasures of food and wine, a man who may not have known a woman but nevertheless knew what it felt like for a woman to pour precious oil on his feet and rub it in with her hair. A man who was beaten and crucified and pierced with a sword.

Last spring, I was at a conference when one of my familiar afflictions descended. The constellation of knots that line my neck and shoulders is uncomfortable and immobilizing—turning my head becomes instantly impossible—but the knots aren’t debilitating. I was still able to participate, albeit gingerly.

One night at dinner, a friend noticed when I winced. I long ago learned that my aches and pains are boring to other people (my apologies), so I admitted the condition and quickly changed the subject. She changed it back. The whole table listened as she shared a bit of testimony: after years of severe back pain, she read a book by John Sarno and, upon fully accepting his mind-body philosophy, had experienced healing.

Sarno’s theory is fairly simple. Some pain has physiological roots: torn muscles, broken bones, slipped discs. But other pain is psychogenic, real pain provoked by underlying stress: repressed anger, subconscious anxiety. Certain personalities are more susceptible to psychogenic back pain. Another factor is a culture that tends to be more sympathetic toward physical than emotional pain: it’s safer to cope with back pain than something as socially unacceptable as rage.

To treat psychogenic pain the way one would treat physiological pain is as ineffective as trying to cure osteogenesis imperfecta with the power of positive

thinking. My friend works the Sarno program, regularly searching for sparks of anger and anxiety before they can set psychosomatic fires to the nerves in her back. And my friend is free of back pain.

I ordered one of Sarno's books that night. I wish I could say I'm healed. Attending more carefully to my spiritual and emotional health does seem to loosen the neck and shoulder knots. On the other hand, I recently chucked the book across my bedroom—in an entirely unrepressed expression of rage—during one of the worst episodes of muscle spasms I've ever experienced. Either the Sarno method doesn't always work, or my new chiropractor's structural diagnosis is correct.

Part of coping with pain is imbuing it with meaning. But my inability to discern the reason for my pain makes it all but impossible to craft a theory of its purpose. Maybe labor really was worse than the back pain ten days later, but there was an enormous difference: the labor pains were going to end with a baby. If there must be pain, let it not be in vain. Let it make us stronger, or wiser, or more compassionate. If the lamb of God must be slain, at least let him take away the sins of the world.

When I don't know where my pain comes from or what purpose it has, all that's left is hope. Hope for healing, however it comes—through shots, through prayer, through downward facing dog. But I need a hope that stretches farther, too, a hope that will sustain me even when the shots wear off, the prayers go unanswered, and I collapse on my yoga mat in tears. I need a hope that stretches me beyond my own small suffering, that encompasses the great torment of the whole seemingly godforsaken world. I need an eschatological hope.

There is a case for such hope, even for aching bodies. God is not in the business of simply gathering ephemeral spirits in heaven. N. T. Wright contends that in the New Testament,

the word *soul*, though rare, reflects when it does occur underlying Hebrew or Aramaic words referring not to a disembodied entity hidden within the outer shell of the disposable body but rather to what we would call the whole person or personality, seen as being confronted by God.

To proclaim the bodily resurrection of Christ is to affirm that his whole person was restored to life. Paul assures us that we will be united in a resurrection like Christ's. Life is fully embodied on both sides of eternity, but suffering doesn't survive death.

Perhaps it is yearning born of desperation. Yet the hope of resurrection—my own bodily resurrection, my naked soul before God—cuts through my despair. Jesus' new body bore the scars of what he had suffered. They were deep enough for Thomas to wedge his hand into. But I know the signs of pain, and the risen Lord wasn't in any. His agony was finished, just as he said as he breathed his last.