

Living with chronic pain without asking why

When I'm simply present to my own pain, I learn to be present to others' pain, too.

by [Luan Huska](#) in the [December 30, 2020](#) issue



(Photo by Tim Mossholder on Unsplash)

Seven years ago I was pregnant with our first child and preparing for an unmedicated birth. I had taken diligent notes from childbirth classes and books and felt ready to go “floppy soggy” and “make friends with the heavy feeling of release.” When labor started, though, my body and mind did things other than I intended. I braced. I held my breath. I couldn’t let go of control of my insides. I told my husband I was worried something would fall out of me, and he replied, “That’s what’s supposed to happen.”

A turning point came when after several days and nights of early labor our midwife suggested Pitocin, a drug that increases the intensity of contractions and speeds labor. Faced with the choice between losing control over my body through medical intervention or losing control by melting into the waves of pain and pressure, something switched in my mind and I finally let go. I stopped resisting the pain. I

rode the waves and let a primal, body-based consciousness take over. Our son, all ten and a half pounds of him, was born a couple hours later.

Learning to accept the pain of childbirth was one point in the larger arc of redefining my relationship with pain. Growing up in the evangelical subculture, I learned that pain and suffering were not God's Plan A. Pain, disease, and death came into the world through Adam and Eve's original sin, I was taught. Even if individuals did nothing to deserve it, our physical suffering was still a consequence of our collective bad action. It was a reminder that things were not as they should be.

This interpretation of pain has a long history in Christianity, but it is also partly a reaction to evolutionary theory. The communities I come from have felt the need to defend God's role as the mastermind behind creation, and the idea that pain and disease may be built into the natural order seems heretical. To some, it amounts to saying that God's creation is flawed, that he is an incompetent designer. So pain must be labeled as outside, not endemic to the world God intended.

But there is an even deeper tendency behind this narrative. It is the need, so prevalent in all human groups, to separate good from bad, inside from outside, kin from stranger, safe from dangerous. In my Southern Baptist teenage years, we did this with music. Music made by Christian bands was safe for consumption; music made by non-Christians was suspect and had to be approved by someone in authority. This is an either-or type of thinking which seeks clarity and simplicity, neatness and order. It is a human tendency. We need mental shortcuts and people who have more experience than we do telling us what is safe or unsafe, or we'd spend all our time puzzling over plants that look yummy and could be edible or wondering at the meaning of streaks of lightning in the sky.

But these mental shortcuts have often done us a disservice as our world has become more complex. We have labeled entire neighborhoods as unsafe. Church leaders have told us Eastern religions contain malignant spiritual energy. We have been taught to avoid situations and people that might actually be good for us—that might expand our horizons and show us another dimension of truth.

When I started having chronic pain in my early twenties, my learned habit of lumping things into one of two categories—good or bad—meant that I kept turning over the pain in my head, asking, *Why?* I was constantly trying to parse out what was good or bad about it. Was it from God, and thus good, because he was trying to

refine my character? Or was it bad because it was an indicator of our fallen nature, something that God did not intend and that I should try to overcome?

I still haven't found satisfactory answers to these questions, and so I've stopped asking them. As I've let go of the need to put my pain in a category, the pain itself has changed. What it does for me has changed. When I don't resist pain—resisting it often only intensifies it and adds to my anxiety—other ways of relating open up. One set of pain management meditations encourages me to place my focus gently on the pain but not give it more attention than any other area of my body. I begin to notice that the pain has edges, texture, and a color. It changes from day to day.

When I'm present to my own pain, not judging it as good or bad, I learn to be present to others' pain, to creation's pain. Feeling the pain, instead of shrinking my vision and cutting me off from the world, tunes me in to the other textures and patterns of pain outside my own body. Pain can, if I let it, sharpen my senses and awaken my contemplative vision. "Contemplation is waiting patiently for the gaps to be filled in, and it does not insist on quick closure or easy answers," writes Richard Rohr in *The Universal Christ*. "It never rushes to judgment, and in fact avoids making quick judgments because judgments have more to do with egoic, personal control than with a loving search for truth."

As we seek to recover the contemplative spirit in our churches, to see God in the pain of our world today, I think we have something to learn from the ancient Taoist text, the *Tao Te Ching*. In Stephen Mitchell's translation, the Master says, "Know the male, yet keep to the female: receive the world in your arms. If you receive the world, the Tao will never leave you and you will be like a little child. . . . Accept the world as it is. If you accept the world, the Tao will be luminous inside you and you will return to your primal self."

This teaching can be difficult for Western-trained readers, who may immediately note an essentialism of male and female that seems to underscore binary thinking. But this passage is actually an antidote to that sort of thinking. It allows us to see the connections, the oneness, the wholeness behind the fragments we've made of the world in our rush to judge, divide, and conquer. The female, if I can learn anything from my experience of childbirth, is a way of being with and being in that doesn't seek control or even rational understanding. This is a reality that is open to everyone. The female inside all of us receives. The female feels to the core. The female births.

Yet some will say there must be a space for resistance. Receiving the world as it is could imply passive agreement and participation with oppressive human regimes. Absolutely. It is possible, I think, to refuse to judge the pain we experience and to let it work on us—while also naming and resisting the structures that are exacerbating the pain. Accepting pain does not have to mean legitimizing unjust social arrangements that make suffering worse for the marginalized. Here again, we can release ourselves from either-or thinking and find more generative ways forward.

The pandemic has unveiled social injustices in painful new ways. Many of us are asking why and trying to find some narrative to make sense of our collective pain. This can be helpful sometimes, but it is not always necessary. Can we be present, pay close attention, and allow the pain to work like magma beneath the tectonic plates of our souls and societies? Maybe, if we let it, the pain will cause tremors, rearrange the landscape, and give birth to new continents of human experience.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Pain without answers.”