

# Love, Suffering and Evil: A Neopagan View

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No one born in the 20th century can have missed the challenge to spiritual worldviews raised by the carnage of its wars and massacres, as well as the suffering caused by disease, natural disasters and general hard knocks of everyday life. So much pain! So much unhappiness! Neopagan religion celebrates and honors all basic dimensions of existence, but in light of so much suffering, some critics ask whether in doing so we demonstrate a naive or even willful blindness to evil and the omnipresent nature of human affliction.

It is correct that Neopagan religion does not focus on evil, spiritual or otherwise. But this lack of emphasis is no failing. Our understanding of the relationship of good and evil is different, reflecting the different dimension of spiritual reality upon which we focus. Our view of suffering is in broad agreement with that of Pagan spirituality in general, emphasizing healing our relationships and restoring harmony within the world. Our world is neither perfect nor fallen, but it is sacred. We see around us beauty and folly, wisdom and suffering, life and death, acceptance and transcendence. In our clearer, stronger moments, we accept and embrace it all, as ultimately good, no matter how well disguised. At the core of our worldview is “perfect trust” in the “perfect love” of our Gods.

But if our world is the sacred manifestation of a loving Source, indeed a perfectly loving Source, why does it contain so much suffering, and why does so much of this suffering seem gratuitous? Even beginning to answer these questions raises fundamental theological issues. If the world is an artifact, produced by a Master Potter, it may make sense to combine all suffering into a single category of transcendent malignity. But this approach is certainly alien to a Pagan perspective which delights in the diversity as well as the ultimate goodness of the world. This indiscriminate amalgamation of everything harmful — from tornadoes to cancer to serial killers — into a single category hampers our capacity to come to terms with them.

I would divide the suffering we encounter in life into three broad, and distinct, groups: 1) suffering which is the natural result of embodied existence, 2) accidental suffering which is the result of unintended human actions, and 3) deliberately inflicted suffering, both human and spiritually caused. None are ultimately in conflict with the basic idea that the Source of all and the world which is its manifestation are absolutely good.

Embodied existence necessarily brings suffering in its wake. Disease, drought, earthquakes, floods, the pain and decrepitude arising from our aging, and other natural calamities, all cause human suffering. Neopagans may not consider death and illness to be an evil, resulting from human sin, but we deeply mourn the passing of our loved ones, and in the midst of sickness and pain we **sometimes** doubt whether our world is in fact a truly good place. Our approach to these issues necessarily combines personal spiritual experience and insight with efforts by the broader spiritual community to answer these questions, since among today’s Pagans, spiritual understanding is as much based on

personal experience as on philosophy or theology.

### A Mystical Experience:

The event that proved most pivotal to my understanding of suffering occurred during a “dark night of the soul” where everything in my life seemed jinxed, and my strongest efforts to accomplish any important goals appeared utterly in vain. I was depressed, frequently in despair, and painfully aware of my own shortcomings. What hope I felt drew upon my earlier experiences of the Goddess and Her unconditional love. It seemed to me that if I could cultivate that feeling within my own heart, I would be less vulnerable to the pain arising out of continual disappointments.

One morning, while driving from the country to the city where I was moving, I was suddenly surrounded by a Presence of perfect love. Unlike my previous experiences with the divine, no other qualities were present. I sensed neither maleness nor femaleness, neither a feeling of the natural world nor of an ethereal realm. This loving Presence was neither personal nor impersonal; rather, it was completely personal but without the limitations we associate with personhood. In trying to describe this experience such limiting terms fail. There was nothing but love and perfect understanding for all things, everywhere. This Presence poured forth an immensity of care for each unique and individual being. The insight accompanying my experience indicated this was the fundamental quality of All that Is, the Godhead, the Source from which all Gods and Goddesses and everything else manifests. In Traditional Wiccan terms, this Source is known as the Dryghton.

Within the context of this outpouring of love, all suffering and misfortune acquired a context that redeemed them. At the deepest level it was clear that everything was as it should be — all beings were loved, none were truly alone, and all were of consequence. Lilies of the field, falling sparrows, and despairing Pagans were not living futile lives, nor was the meaning of their lives located solely in the part they played in a larger drama whose nature and outcome they could not grasp, although that was also true. In addition, each being was personally important and protected at a spiritual level. As with similar reports from others so blessed, this experience passed all too quickly. But my memory of it, and ability to recall the love and beauty which characterized it, decisively changed my view of life. **Unconditional** divine love embraces all beings and permeates everything.

Despite powerful similarities, many spiritual traditions describe this encounter with the Ultimate in different ways. Most important, some depict their experiences in personal terms, others in impersonal ones. All describe what happened to them in the context of their own spiritual traditions, using concepts familiar to their audience. Usually left unaddressed are the efforts of modern theologians to make something important out of these terminological difference. On the other hand, reports of these encounters almost always say that no words are adequate to the experience, so it may be best to avoid unnecessary precision when describing the transcendent. I am not suggesting all mystical experiences are the same. But mystical accounts from many traditions of which I have knowledge do appear to share the view that perfect and unconditional love, not suffering, is fundamental to reality.

Those beings whom I term the “high Gods” partake of this same loving quality, but in a more individualized way. The Goddess, for example, is feminine and, as She has manifested to me, carries a sense of nature, of sun and shade-dappled meadows, dark groves of trees, merry brooks and brilliant flowers. By virtue of possessing these characteristics She does not possess others, for example, the masculine. She is therefore a more limited expression of that ultimate Divinity which is beyond limits.

### Love and Reciprocity:

If Ultimate Divinity is best described as perfect love, why would it manifest, or be manifested in, a world where we love imperfectly, suffer greatly, and then die? Why do limited, fallible, suffering beings exist at all: what’s the point? At best we can speculate. If love cares for nothing so much as the beloved, then the more perfect the love, the greater the understanding and treasuring of the beloved. There is no greater nor more perfect love than that of the Ultimate. From this, everything flows.

This view can be challenged. Because the Divine is beyond human understanding, some argue no terms adequately describe It/Him/Her. In one sense I agree. Even the experience I had was beyond the power of words to describe, and my experience was limited by my humanity. But if the Divine were totally other we would not only be unable to describe it even imperfectly, we would have no reason to worship or honor it. It may be that love, which we first learn about in a human context, is only a metaphor for how we experience the Divine, but it is universally recognized as the best metaphor. As love, it connects with a human capacity, but it encompasses complete understanding and universal unconditional acceptance which human love does not.

A perfect and limitless love would desire the existence of an enormous variety of beings manifesting every way in which a good life can potentially be lived. Each being would be treasured and cherished, regardless of whether that love was returned, because Divine love is unconditional. Individuality brings variety, both of beings and of how they act. For choices to be genuine some must be better than others. Meaningful choice implies the possibility of error. In addition, given the assumption of Divine perfection, individuality can arise only if Divinity in some way limits itself. The material world is limited. When matter exists, boundaries exist. In manifesting itself in the material world, the Divine necessarily individuates. Self-aware material beings are particularly aware of boundaries, and with this awareness comes the recognition of individuality.

Every limitation creates the possibility of new individuality, and a new way of manifesting Divine love. That this limitation is self-chosen by the Divine is evidenced by Its capacity to manifest in the awareness of people, through mystical experience. If such manifestations occur as a gift of grace, I suspect it is because a limited awareness cannot on its own encounter the unlimited. In such experiences we directly experience the context within which we exist, a context which is perfect and loving. The Divine takes joy in loving. The more beings to love, the greater the joy.

Classical philosophers would challenge such a statement as supposedly implying an incompleteness on the part of the Ultimate. They assumed that all possible value can be

actualized in an ultimate being all by itself. Not only does this view beg the question of why anything else exists, it also implies that perfect love is uninvolved with its beloved. But Charles Hartshorne, among others, has persuasively argued this is an error (1984:27-32). Unconditional love is most fulfilled when the beloved is also fulfilled. To care about another is to be changed by that other. The more the beloved is fulfilled in love, the more delight to the lover. So it makes little sense to argue a perfect being is less perfect because its perception of its well-being can be influenced by the circumstances of others. To love is part of perfection. Therefore, being influenced by others is part of perfection. Each of us loves uniquely, and is loved uniquely. In this relationship something genuinely new is created, something that depends upon a change in the relationship of the beloved to the lover.

Because the Divine is aware of everything, its existence is enriched without thereby implying it was previously impoverished. Here, perhaps, is the ultimate meaning behind the phrase “to him who has is given.” Love is only genuine when given freely. Free beings, particularly ones limited in knowledge and wisdom, expand their capacity to love in different ways and at different times. Each takes its own path. Each will be uniquely itself. Because the Ultimate is aware of everything, when we become more loving towards one another, the well being of both the Divine and the other is enhanced. Believing otherwise may thus be seen as an error of the ancients. From fullness comes even greater fullness. Hartshorne quotes Jules Lequier as saying, truly, that “God, who sees things change, changes also in beholding them, or else does not perceive that they change” (Hartshorne 1984:v). The world of freedom is a world where each of us, slowly, hesitantly, often fearfully (and perhaps over lifetimes), grows in our capacity to love and care. In doing so we enrich ourselves and All That Is. Along the way many of us take plenty of detours, and given our limitations, make plenty of errors..

Spirit and Matter:

Many classical Pagan philosophers considered matter to be the “densest” manifestation of Spirit, or as that dimension of Spirit farthest from the Source of ultimate Goodness and Love. Often the words of Classical philosophers such as Porphyry seemed almost to condemn the existence of the physical world every bit as much as did the ancient Gnostics, who considered the world the creation of an evil God who used it to trap souls into material bodies. Classical Pagan philosophy was well aware of the difference between spiritual love and material life as most of them experienced it. As a result, it was often critical of the material world, although it rarely condemned matter because physicality was thought to be a manifestation of God and so worthy of regard.

It is obvious that I take a happier view of the matter of matter. I think this difference is two-fold. First, the place and time in which I live enables most people to live in at least modest prosperity and freedom. Our times are not unique in this regard. **Apparently** hunting and gathering peoples rarely found the world a bad place to live. **This** unhappy condition came later with the advent of slavery, despotism, and mass poverty. Observers from those unhappy times can be forgiven their jaundiced conclusions about life. The liberal democratic transformation has finally enabled the mass of people to again enjoy modest security and prosperity. The poor are now a minority group. Second, I reject the

error of equating perfection and the Ultimate with imperviousness to change, a position which necessarily devaluates matter.

Yet there is a sense in which our ancestors were correct. Embodiment situates us in a world permeated by need. All living things live in a state of need. Physical embodiment requires us to seek physical sustenance. We must take in energy to survive. We need food, water, safety, shelter, and more. Much of physical life is oriented towards satisfying those needs or suffering in the absence of their satisfaction. Consequently, material existence seemingly stands in stark tension with our experience of the Ultimate, which manifests perfect and unconditional love while being itself perfectly fulfilled. As physical beings we are always subject to need, and therefore to the possibility of deprivation. From this possibility comes a consequent fear of doing without, and the suffering it causes. I think that most human suffering has its deepest roots in the ubiquity of need, and our fearful response to its deprivation.

Individual awareness in our world is mediated through physical structure. Every individual of every species is characterized by the limitations and possibilities inherent in its physical nature. Every being is powerfully shaped by the forces which influence how it survives and reproduces. This is so even if the core of all awareness is perfect love — for physical structures shape and allow awareness to manifest and act in material form. Throughout most of life's history on earth, natural selection was the ultimate editor determining which forms flourished and which did not. If life is free to develop in all directions, learning how to acquire energy, survive and thrive in a material world, ultimately some beings will begin to explore the possibilities of living at the expense of others. If other beings can provide more readily accessible energy than could non-living processes such as sunlight, the path to greater complexity of living beings expanded considerably. This expansion began with the first munching of a plant and accelerated enormously when an early muncher was, itself, munched.

Less-aware forms of life seek sustenance with no concern other than acquiring enough to maintain their existence, and to multiply. A very rich and diverse world must have arisen before a physical organism can become complex enough to manifest individuated self-awareness. The shape of our bodies, and the complexity of our brains, are the result of millions of years where natural selection edited what was viable in this world, and what was to be cast aside. A consciousness such as our own could only exist because beings were continually subject to pressures to change and adapt, gradually enriching and diversifying the forms life takes. For physical consciousness to evolve to the point where it could act with self-aware loving-kindness, it had to evolve through many less-aware levels, taking advantage of whatever opportunities existed to obtain the energy needed to survive and prosper.

Our genes and DNA are the record of our inheritance, and our kinship with all life. And so, our awareness is involved, on one hand in meeting the needs for physical survival, and on the other with comprehending values far beyond personal utility. In an important sense, the physical world is complete and sacred in its own right. It manifests peace and beauty, marvelous variety and the many delights apparent to the senses. We make contact with this perfection when we contemplate nature without judgment. There is no real need

to subjectively import beauty into nature. It is there, and we discover it. Robinson Jeffers caught this point when he wrote of the natural world: “the human sense of beauty is our metaphor for their excellence” (1977:57). I suspect this is why so many meditative traditions maintain that, in order to experience our deepest and most fundamental state of being, we must quiet the part of our minds involved in everyday awareness — a self-awareness shaped by the requirements of survival in a world of need — and that when we accomplish this, what is revealed is indescribably good.

Until we finally develop our capacity for genuine love, Nature will remain that manifestation of Spirit which is most fulfilling for us, precisely because in itself it is complete, and we are still incomplete. Even so, there are additional possibilities for Spirit to manifest physically, possibilities that require self-aware consciousness in order to arise. But because our existence is rooted in need, our obsession with meeting needs and avoiding fears can cause us to lose sight of both the perfection of nature and of our own inherent possibilities. As more complex beings than our less self-conscious relations, we are also more prone than they to error. We are capable of making all the mistakes other kinds of life can make, plus many more they cannot.

To flourish, human beings depend upon physical and emotional intimacy and affection. Infants deprived of loving human contact rarely survive. Nor does this appear true of human babies alone. The experience of gentleness, care, and intimacy appears to be necessary for living beings whose awareness has developed beyond a certain threshold. And the more self-aware the being, the more it needs and desires trust, affection, and delight in the affectionate reciprocation of others. In its absence such beings often die, and those that survive are scarred. This is what we would expect to find if full awareness is love, and if we are the most self-aware of material beings. In our self-awareness we are separated from most animals and, without long and disciplined effort, from their ability to focus on the moment. But that very self-awareness which so easily separates us from living in the beauty of the moment also deepens our capacity for love. If self-awareness was our peculiarly human Fall, it is also our Glory. Self-awareness is a necessary element in the development of loving awareness of. It makes possible a differentiated and reciprocated love between individuated beings. Such love need not be limited but, among human beings who are dominated by their fears and needs, it often is.

Rooting our capacity for love in self-awareness seems paradoxical. Only self-aware beings can be selfish. But this commonplace only scratches the surface of what it is to be self-aware. To act in my own interest requires me to have a conception of my future self, a self which does not yet exist. My capacity for empathy enables me to identify with this future self because from my present perspective this future self is an “other” — a hypothetical other. Without my capacity to put myself in the place of an other I could never overcome the temptation to seek immediate gratification at the expense of my long term well-being. If I empathize with my future self, putting its happiness ahead of my immediate gratification, I can refrain from that temptation. The same empathetic capacity that helps me act for my own long term well-being enables me to identify with other selves and act in their interest.

Implicit in human nature is the capacity to love in ever-widening circles of inclusion, and

the more we develop our humanity, the more inclusive those circles become. It is this capacity for expanding that which we love which appears most truly unique to human beings among the life forms on this planet. The American ecologist Aldo Leopold captured this insight when he wrote that while we can mourn the extinction of the passenger pigeon, whose flocks once numbered in the millions before being destroyed by market hunters, no passenger pigeon would have mourned our passing had it been we who disappeared instead. He concluded that “For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun” (1966:117). It is this quality of unselfish care, care that blossoms into love, that we can bring into the world. It is our most unique gift to life.

## Death

But what about the abundant suffering we all experience? The same world which makes our physical existence possible also makes that existence necessarily brief. Death may not be the greatest source of suffering, but we often fear our own passing and are deeply pained by the passing of loved ones, especially the young and innocent. How may death and suffering be made to harmonize with the idea of perfect love? Is death the sad tax we must pay so that the Ultimate can love us, or is there more to the matter? Nothing seems more directly to undercut the value of individuality than the death which destroys our physical existence. Individuals are filled with extraordinary potential, and death brings it to an end, often in ways that appear very premature. On a bill board in the town in which I live is the photo of a happy young boy. It reminds us that he was killed by a drunken driver. How can a young child, with almost all his life ahead of him, be killed by a drunk driver in a good world? Yet if the world is good, death is too central a feature to our existence to be no more than a sign of worldly imperfection or a sad necessity for physical embodiment.

We can take two approaches in trying to come to terms with death, and both are valid. We can ask what role death plays in the existence of those conscious beings for whom we care, and we can ask why death exists at all. The first question is the easiest. Christian and Pagan alike agree that consciousness is not dependent upon physical bodies. Destruction of a body need not imply the destruction of awareness. This is a commonplace for any spiritual practice which encourages, and even teaches, its adherents how to have contact with the world of spirits, as does Traditional Wicca and much of Neopaganism in general. What is really at stake here is not whether departed loved ones no longer exist, and most Pagans agree there is no compelling reason to believe this is the case. From a Pagan perspective death appears to be a moving on, a shedding of one's skin, a change of abode to a new dimension of existence.

If the Source of All is supremely good, and the universe is its expression and receives divine love without condition, then only our partial vision makes death appear to be an evil cutting down of vital, loving and beautiful beings. We are not aware of the true context in which a being dies. Our perspective is inevitably limited and to an unavoidable extent, self-centered. But by itself this answer is unsatisfactory. If life is a blessing, why move on? Why experience death at all? If we simply reincarnate, why ever leave? Ultimately, of course, the answer to this question remains a mystery. But reasonable speculation helps give us confidence that the ultimate truth is in harmony with our

spiritual experience. An analogy I have long liked may help us to understand this.

Each time I backpacked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and out again, at some point I questioned why I was doing it. Sore and blistered feet, the fatigue of carrying a heavy pack back up 5000 feet of trail to the rim, and the relentless draining heat of the desert sun are no fun. Once one of my knees went out at its very bottom, just after crossing the Colorado River on a suspension bridge. I could not bend my leg without excruciating pain. It was a very long hike out. But even when my knees were fine, more than once I have wondered why I am doing this. More than once I have thought of nothing but the restaurant on top, with its comfortable chairs, good food, air conditioning, great views, and table service. And when I get to the top, I go there. And I enjoy that restaurant immensely.

But, and this is my point, I am also very grateful to have been at the Grand Canyon, to have backpacked into its immensity, to have experienced its beauty and peace in ways unavailable to those viewing it from its rim or by airplane, unavailable even to those who take a mule to the bottom. Trips such as I have taken are transformative in ways less challenging ventures are not. I and the others who do these things are enriched in ways in which those who settle for a view from a restaurant are not, no matter how good the wine, the service, and the food. And once I have been away for a while, I am ready for another trip. These trips inevitably entail suffering. And there have been times when my physical suffering was far the greater part of what I experienced. However the suffering is the price of the experience, and in my view one well worth paying. Abstracted from the experience as a whole, of course, the pain is not worth while. But the pain is not abstracted. It is part of the package. I can reduce my suffering through wise preparation, or make it worse (or even terminal) through foolishness or bad luck, but it is an unavoidable part of the trip.

In some ways I think life is like a backpack into beautiful but challenging country. It is strenuous and tiring, but it is also enriching in ways unavailable without the experience, and in this context death may be viewed as a time of relaxation. Our religions and our philosophies are trail maps, hopefully good ones, guiding us into and through terrain far beyond our ken. But if the world and its Source are good, there should be no ultimate cause for worry. This faith-as-confidence is in harmony with Pagan spirituality because it is grounded in spiritual experience, not dogma written by another.

There may be other reasons for death. To manifest and develop our own capacities we may need to live more than once. For example, to be a man or a woman leads in many respects to very different ways of living. Perhaps we need to live at least once in each role. As a rule our individual gifts and talents vastly exceed the opportunities available to us to develop them in a single lifetime. Our lives are continually filled with fateful choices. We take one path rather than another, becoming different people than we otherwise would have been. Our world offers far more ways to live in fulfilling ways than can be grasped in a single lifetime. Perhaps we need many lives — to backpack not just into canyons, but high into mountains and exploring coasts and valleys and forests and plains as well.

This view is strengthened by those of a Pagan culture of great antiquity. In South Asia we commonly think people regard rebirth as a misfortune. The reality is more complex. From the time of the early Upanishads until the present, their spiritual traditions have acknowledged that some will wish to get off life's wheel, others to return again. (Doniger 1998:28). And for those we most love, is there not a special blessing in loving them in many ways over many lifetimes — as lover and as friend, as parent and as child? The myriad ways we can live may constitute a vital part of this process of developing our capacity to love. As a Traditional Wiccan teaching puts it, “to fulfill love you must return again at the same time and place as the loved one, and you must remember and love them again” (Farrar 1984:30). For those of us who love life, and one another, reincarnation is a blessing. It is yet another trip into the sacred beauty of the Grand Canyon.

Death also appears to be a necessary accompaniment to physical growth. Only a form of life which no longer reproduced itself would need to be freed from the hand of death. Immortal material forms that reproduced would sooner or later fill up all available space. The worst predictions of the pessimistic English clergyman, Thomas Malthus, would come true. And as I emphasized, complex forms such as ourselves arose from the process of natural selection, with death the final editor. If physical life is good, it is appropriate for other beings also to have the experience of living. Part of life, and certainly part of love, is sharing. Divine love includes unconditional respect, concern and regard for and delight in others. We who do not fully embody this quality nevertheless find ourselves in a world where each life-form cannot help but provide for the existence of others. The attitude with which we confront this truth is important. Concern for the well-being of generations to come, human and otherwise, is perhaps the most unselfish type of love we can easily practice.

From a Neopagan perspective, part of life is learning to be in harmony with the sacred rhythms that make embodiment possible, including living in harmony with death. When we see death as sacramental, and acknowledge the dependence of virtually all living things on other living things, the modern tendency to over-sentimentalize life, and be offended by its reality, can be healed. So long as we deny the sacredness of death, we cannot truly embrace life.

Our society's denial of death's sacramental character takes many forms. Disapproval of death motivates those who attach a deep moral significance to vegetarianism. There are good reasons for some people being vegetarians, but refraining from killing is not one of them. Human beings cannot avoid killing — or at least delegating that task to others on whom we depend, so it is done out of our sight. This is as true for vegetarians as anyone else. To grow crops a farmer must displace countless animals from their homes as he or she prepares fields for sowing. More animals, gophers and rabbits, crows and sparrows, and countless insects, may be killed so that the crops can be preserved and harvested for our use. The best farmers minimize killing, but few can eliminate it. Some vegetarians feel more virtuous than omnivores because they do not eat animal food, but they miss the point. There is plenty of blood hidden in a plate of spinach.

To live well, life requires us to integrate a paradox. In unconditionally accepting life's value and beauty, we must also accept death, which appears to be its negation. How we

accomplish this acceptance is one of the challenges facing all spiritual paths. Neopagan theology provides a way to embrace both poles of the paradox within an unconditional affirmation of life. I believe this is one of the gifts Pagan spirituality can offer — an acceptance of death as part of a world that is good. Not finding death to be evil does not lead us to devalue life, or fail to treat others well. For example, my criticisms of self-righteousness in some vegetarians in no way justifies contemporary factory farming, where chickens, pigs, and other animals are confined to simplified mechanical environments, and treated as protein producing machines. Neither animals, nor anything else, are simply objects to be shoved and manipulated for human ends. Animals are worthy of respect, and in a factory farm there is no respect for life.

But when we fear death as the greatest of evils, we desperately utilize any and all things in a futile attempt to prevent it. In doing so we devalue the world around us. Physicality itself becomes an enemy we need to conquer in order to preserve what? — our physicality! Another paradox, but this is a harmful one. In honoring death we embrace life more fully. In rejecting death we retreat from life itself.

The physical world is always in a state of change. Things come into being, manifest, and then pass away. In seeking to arrest that change we try and make the physical world something it is not. To preserve our physical existence against all change, we find ourselves unable to truly accept or appreciate it. We act not so much from a love of life as from a fear of death, thereby committing a double error. For life should be loved and death should not be feared. To do less with either is not truly to trust the Divine nor to act with gratitude for the life we are given.

Neopagans honor death as a necessary part of life. Traditional Wiccans invite its presence at Samhain. It is not that we seek to die. But we know that for each of us our time will come, and we seek to grow in wisdom and insight to the point that when it does come, we will pass that way without fear, saying, as would the wisest of the Plains Indians, “Today is a good day to die.”.

### Physicality and Suffering

Arguments such as these demonstrate there is no necessary reason to believe death is in any way evidence of spiritual fallenness or failure. But, important as they are, these considerations only begin to address the issue of suffering. Why does so much suffering exist if the world is at bottom holy and sacred? Granted some death and attendant suffering may be unavoidable. Why is there so much of it? Why does the sum total of suffering that we see around us appear so much greater than a reasonable minimum? A world of change and creativity will of necessity also be a world where anything in material form is subject to decline. All change is a passing away as well as a coming into being. In the world we experience, everything changes. At the peak of physical vitality the seed of decline sprouts. A world of freedom and creativity seems to require a process like this. We commemorate this world with our ritual cycle of the Wheel of the Year.

A good model of this dimension to physical reality is a kaleidoscope, or perhaps a sunset. Each moment of beauty must pass if new beauty is to arise, and the full cycle of such a

process far surpasses that available in any freeze frame, for change is part of the beauty. To enjoy a kaleidoscope or a sunset we do not fixate on a single moment, allowing ourselves to become enchanted by the beauty of the changing patterns. The same is true for life itself.

From this perspective there is no contradiction underlying the tension between spirit and matter. For living matter to exist a tension between need and sufficiency naturally arises. Only through incorporating this tension into the heart of existence can new and deeper ways of loving emerge, or at least emerge into physical reality. The pull of our material needs can, and usually does, get in the way of our awareness of Spirit, yet our physicality simultaneously provides the means by which beings such as ourselves would exist in the first place. And in overcoming the tension between the two through embracing it, we develop powers of wisdom and depths of love and compassion far more deeply than would otherwise be the case. Spirit as it manifests in matter uses need to create a beautiful world **which** is complete in itself, but which also creates the preconditions for even more inclusive and varied manifestations of love to arise.

What might be seen as imperfections in a world created once and for all by a master craftsman are not necessarily imperfections when the same phenomena are understood as moments within a pattern of change in which Spirit gradually expands the reality of love into the material realm. The orthodox Christian “Divine Potter theology” necessitates criticizing the world as we encounter it. Pagan process theology does not. From our perspective what appear to be the world’s “imperfections” take on added dimensions of meaning, fulfilling them and raising them to blessings. Great music is always more beautiful than even the purest note repeated over and over again even if, for music to exist, that note must “die.”

### Suffering as a Blessing

There is still another dimension to consider. While we rightly do not want to contribute to the suffering of others, it does not follow that their suffering is an unalloyed misfortune, a tragically high price for mere existence. So much depends on context. The natural world provides many examples enabling us to see how that which superficially appears to be suffering and struggle are often essential for the well-being of the individual beings so “afflicted”. Helping a butterfly struggling to emerge from its chrysalis means its wings will not develop. The butterfly will be crippled, never to fly and soon to die. The butterfly’s long and exhausting struggle is essential to its becoming a strong and beautiful being. Perhaps in an analogous way, the insights we gain from accepting and overcoming suffering in our own lives helps us find its deeper significance — even in suffering from which it may seem we cannot recover, or in observing the apparently pointless suffering of others.

Experientially, I know for myself that suffering can ultimately be a blessing. My own experience has shown me that, once worked through, suffering leaves me better off than before. Some whom I know to have life-threatening diseases have also told me their illnesses were good for them in very profound ways. So I hesitate to judge suffering as simply bad, much as I also try to avoid it. For suffering to be to the ultimate benefit of

those who suffer, it must help create qualities which would not otherwise arise. Otherwise it is needless. Occasions for suffering are so many, and in some cases apparently so uncompensated, that any analysis here must be very tentative, for how can a human being know what qualities will arise from suffering that he or she has not undergone? Yet general patterns do arise.

Genuine care for others often seems to arise from our suffering, either directly or by empathic identification with the suffering of others. Often it first ignites the fire of care in our hearts. Until that fire is lit, we possess only the seed of a human spirit, closed in upon itself, without depth of understanding of either ourselves or others. The fire of care warms and softens that seed, enabling it to sprout. If I had never suffered, I doubt that I would either understand compassion or practice it to the limited extent that I do. It is our compassion that opens us up to loving others for themselves, fulfilling our humanity. I am not suggesting that what appears bad to us is not really bad. It is sometimes very bad. A compassionate person will regret former actions which hurt others. If those others are able ultimately to turn those actions to a good end, the person who caused the pain will still rightfully regret having caused that suffering. But while bad things do happen they are not meaningless, ultimately gratuitous, or cosmically bad. They do not leave irreducible stains on the fabric of existence.

Suffering is often, though not always, evidence of mistakes by ourselves or others. Every time a misstep occurs, an opportunity arises to take the dance into new directions of grace and beauty. If we fail, it is often because we **do not** know the steps. We stumble a lot. At least I do. But over time we become more sure-footed. Practice makes us into better dancers, each with our unique steps.

My argument is subject to a serious misinterpretation. Neither I nor anyone else can appropriately approach someone suffering a great evil, such as the murder of a loved one, and say that this was for their own or the victim's ultimate good. If I do not know what that greater good is I have no right to say such a thing, and I feel some trepidation in even discussing this issue abstractly. I know my argument has proven true for me, so far, and also for many others. But I would never tell someone who just suffered a great tragedy that this was a blessing. The event itself is still bad and those responsible deserve no thanks. The redeeming context has yet to make itself known. It is the worst kind of arrogance to volunteer these judgments to others, particularly concerning suffering we ourselves have not experienced.

My encounter with Divine love convinces me that somehow, and ultimately, good will come of any misfortune, but identification of that good is beyond my knowledge. I am not wise enough to grasp the greater pattern to which so much suffering by human and other beings contributes. I am happy enough occasionally to grasp the pattern of spiritual growth that suffering helps create in my own life. At the level of action, the suffering of others offers us an opportunity to act with love, wisdom, and compassion. At such times that is all that is truly appropriate because that is all that is truly in keeping with our understanding.

On Suffering as the Result of Malice

What of suffering deliberately caused by other human beings? If evil is anything at all, it is malice, a desire to cause suffering in others. But why does malice exist? In my experience, malice is perhaps the most powerful and painful result of ignorance. Errors of judgment by free beings are inevitable. Their existence makes it possible for malice to arise. Many of us have found our anger towards another suddenly to evaporate when we learn we had been misinformed, or had misunderstood that person's actions. What if we had not learned we were wrong? In such cases, our anger could fester and grow. If in consequence we struck out at another verbally or in other ways, that person might strike back, confirming our opinion of their nastiness. The more we distance ourselves from others, the easier it becomes to treat them as alien to us. Psychologically, we do this even to our own selves.

Until our attitudes have been adjusted, our eyes and hearts opened, it is all too easy to feel resentment and anger. If we wallow in it, our comprehension of things can become so distorted that we can give ourselves up to malice. I know. I have done so myself. Many Pagans, myself among them, would say that some spirit entities apparently act from malice. There is no reason to believe that just because a being exists in a non-material way it must therefore be spiritually wise. When I die why should that make me spiritually wiser than I am now? It may. It may not.

Furthermore, many Pagans believe that mind creates, or at least shapes, energy, and energy so influenced reflects the quality of mind which shaped it. We do not need bad spirits for very unpleasant things to manifest and happen on non-material levels. But the existence of malevolent humans and spirits is not evidence of a deep flaw in existence or of an ultimately demonic spiritual principle. We can follow how evil can arise from non-evil sources without outside intervention. All that is required is enough ignorance.

## Conclusion

From a Pagan perspective we can now conclude that much suffering is unnecessary, in the sense that wise beings would neither inflict it nor suffer it. But there is still an irreducible core of suffering inherent to physical existence as such. This irreducible core stems from our existing as mortal material beings who must meet **our physical** and psychological needs in order to live, and who have limited understandings about how to do so, and therefore cannot help but make mistakes. Some people may regard these conditions as signs of fallenness. They are in fact necessary aspects of being a human being in this beautiful world, and the price is worthwhile.

Suffering is not evidence of radical failure. It goes with the package of life — and on balance the package is good. **Indeed, often it is in confronting opposition and trouble that we develop genuine spiritual strength, depth, and beauty.** And it is in this sense that our world is truly harmonious — with perfect love, perfect goodness, and perfect wisdom..

## Bibliography

At the editor's suggestion, **along with the sources cited in this text**, I have culled

several **additional** titles from the bibliography of Pagans and Christians in the New Millennium which I **believe contribute** in an important way to developing a solid philosophical and theological foundation for Pagan religion in the modern world. I have focused on books with which many readers may be unacquainted.

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My favorite proverb is from Africa: "I am because we are." Certainly this article reflects the wisdom and creativity of more people than myself alone. It exists because we are. I would like to thank Kim Atkinson, Richard Ely, Rowan Fairgrove, Anastasia Fischer, D. H. Frew, Anodea Judith, and Anna Korn. To all of them my most sincere gratitude.