NEIGHBOR LOVE THROUGH FEARFUL DAYS

FINDING PURPOSE
AND MEANING
IN A TIME OF CRISIS

JASON A. MAHN

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Cover design: Love Arts Design

Print ISBN: 978-1-5064-7947-7
eBook ISBN: 978-1-5064-7948-4

Making Sense of Meaningless Suffering

People go to great lengths to explain why tragedies happen. When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans fifteen summers ago, it left in its wake not only massive destruction of human life and property but also a number of religious and secular explanations for why God (or Mother Earth) was angry with us. Conservative Christians saw the storm as God's way of punishing evildoers, driving unbelievers to conversion, and preparing the elect for the Rapture. God was angry with the United States for abortion, or homosexuality, or its lack of unqualified support for the State of Israel. Liberal environmentalists had their explanations as well. Mother Earth

was fighting back against our conspicuous consumption and idolatrous worship of fossil fuels. Violent storms are consequences or comeuppances for the violence humans have inflicted on Her.[8]

Whether coming from the right or left, explanatory accounts make sense of a storm that its victims only experience as utterly absurd. *It makes sense* that the hurricane struck New Orleans (or so the explainers explain) given that the Gulf Coast is home to over a quarter of the nation's oil refineries or that the Big Easy is known for its sexual license and immorality. Connecting dots and perceiving patterns allow people to double down on meaningful worldviews, even and especially in the face of meaningless tragedies.

Explanations for why suffering makes sense are known in philosophical and theological quarters as "theodicies"—literally, the justification or defense (*dikê*) of God (*theos*) and of God's ways. To offer a theodicy is to "justify the ways of God to men" or, more philosophically, to offer a defense of the rational or moral coherence of the universe as "the best of all possible worlds."[9]

Theodicies (those defenses) and theodicists (the defenders) are as old as time remembered. The Hebrew Bible's most maddening book is Job, a story of God accepting Satan's bet concerning whether a man named Job, who was entirely innocent and righteous, would continue to praise God if God were to take away all his livestock, his children, and his health. God takes the bet and allows Satan to wreak destruction. The rest of the book of Job consists of Job sitting on a pile of dung, lamenting his plight and imploring God to explain Godself. Job's so-called friends sit shiva with him silently at first and then desperately try to explain his senseless suffering.

Sunday school teachers might say that the book of Job has a take-away lesson. ("If you're patient like Job, God will reward you with even more livestock and a brand-new family!") For anyone who actually reads it, though, it is a confounding story, one that troubles neat and easy understandings of God, suffering, justice, morality, and meaning. It is only Job's friends (and not Job or the book itself) who patiently present explanations

for why he suffers. They begin with the most prevalent reason—suffering is punishment for sin. Later, they change tactics, insisting that if Job's plight is not the consequence of sin, it must be God teaching him a lesson. Whether as punishment for some hidden disobedience or a cosmic ruler slap by a habit-wearing teacher, suffering—they insist—is all part of the master plan.

Except that it's not, which Job and the reader know. In my reading, the book of Job primarily indicates all the problems with our desperate attempts to situate suffering within an airtight explanation. The problem with explaining why suffering makes sense (whether in light of past wrongdoing, future vindication, or something else) is that such explanations and theodicies often rationalize, justify, or defend the pain as reasonable and right. The friends treat Job like a conceptual puzzle to be solved rather than as a friend calling them toward compassion. In their attempts at comprehension, they sidestep his actual affliction, explaining it away.

So why do we do it? Why do we so regularly and so desperately seek to explain tragedy in ways that make sense of it as part of an overarching plan or metaphysical worldview? Explanations and other meaning-making *work*. They sometimes work for good and often work for bad, but they work. That, I think, is why we seek them.

There are studies that show that people who get lung cancer after a life of chain-smoking more easily accept their sickness and death and are more content through the end of their lives compared with those who get lung cancer for no apparent reason. When lung cancer makes sense within understood frameworks of cause and effect (as spelled out on cigarette packs), its victim feels less victimized, or at least not senselessly so. With explanation at hand, those suffering come to terms more easily with their plight.[10]

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl claims that the primary force driving humanity is its search for meaning. The greatest torment of the camps, he writes, was not the hunger, cold, abuse, or looming death but the "unreasonableness of it all." But Frankl also writes

of an ultimate sense of meaning and purpose that can be experienced and affirmed, even in moments of doom and despair. He recalls a time he was forced to work in a trench under a gray sky, grieving for what had become of his life: "I was struggling to find the *reason* for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of immanent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious 'Yes' in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose."[11] Life itself carries tremendous meaning when, even amid the experience of utter abandonment, a person affirms it.

While the search for meaning can lead people to accept lung cancer or survive genocide with their souls intact, we know that it can sometimes do more harm than good. Consider the spouse who stays in an abusive marriage, having come to believe that they deserve it or that God has sent the suffering as their "cross to bear." That hunger, abject poverty, exploitation, or abuse is ordained by God or that those suffering will be compensated with heavenly bliss if only they endure their suffering patiently (like Job!)—such explanations anesthetize the suffering of some while justifying the apathy of others. At the same time, there are ways to find meaning that don't amount to giving explanations. Much depends on *how* we think about suffering. Is it only a problem to be solved? What then do we do with problems that have no solutions—like the "problem" of our mortality? Suffering cannot be solved with greater technological precision or a more refined philosophical theory. We are called to know it in other ways.

STOP

SITTING SHIVA—MARCH 19, 2020

Today is the first day of spring. Yesterday, the last day of winter, was a bustle of activity. Laura was up and off to her church early, where she announced suspension of Sunday worship through mid-April, planned the videos she will post to Facebook in lieu of live sermons, looked in on congregation members, and led her last Wednesday Lenten prayer service. I spent the morning online with a hundred of my colleagues going over the tools and best practices of teaching and learning online—how to use Moodle and Google, Zoom and Loom, forums and chat rooms and blogs (oh my!). In the afternoon, I reached out to the students in my classes—including S., the student prematurely nostalgic for the college she'll graduate from in May. I've become more and more personal with students over my sixteen years of teaching, but my emails yesterday were full-blown parental and pastoral. I told them that I missed them dearly (which is true for almost all of them), that this was an emotionally exhausting time, and that they should try to establish rhythms of sleeping at night and being awake in the day, do some simple breathing meditation, go for walks, hug their family members, and wash their hands. I told them that I would check in by video chat soon.

It was also yesterday that President Trump declared that the coronavirus pandemic is the war of our time. Former Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Bernie Sanders had already compared confrontation with the virus to the waging of a war. French President Emmanuel Macron was

more direct still. "We *are* at war," he repeatedly declared when addressing his citizens two days ago, ordering them to stay in their homes for all but essential activities. In the United States, the administration considered invoking a wartime production act that would allow the government to mobilize industries for national service, requiring them to produce medical supplies and surgical masks. Headlines currently show a number of predictions that COVID-19 casualties may exceed those of World War II.

War language is powerful language, the language of power. Many thus interpret the administration's talk of war positively; after early forays into glib optimism and empty assurances, politicians invoke war to exhibit clear resolve, to gird their loins, and to prepare for battle. Yet I think that much of our work ahead will be the far less unilateral work of patiently waiting out this infectious storm, of learning to care for the infected and affected, of grieving the loss of loved ones. There is much more that we will need to bear and survive rather than conquer and control. War language may be not only irrelevant but also counterproductive to these efforts.

I think of the week immediately following the attacks of 9/11. There was widespread fear and confusion, of course, but also countless makeshift memorials, solidarity vigils, and spontaneous help among strangers. There was an affectionate, palpable patriotism of the most profound kind. It was as if the nation was sitting shiva, purposely persisting in our grief while we waited on one another. That week was incredibly meaningful, whether we were watching images on television or roaming New York like it was a giant prayer labyrinth. It even had something of an overabundance of meaning, as though the importance of every story of firefighters working twelve-hour shifts, every photo of a missing person or hot-dog vendor passing out water, was heightened against the background of the meaningless tragedy itself. Paradoxically, though oversaturated with meaning, none of it meant any one thing. Or rather, because we couldn't situate 9/11 within a well-defined framework of understanding, we didn't know *what* it meant, which became part of the very enigma that we were so devotedly circumambulating. We had no national myth or collective story into

which we could insert the event of 9/11 as climactic action before moving straightaway toward resolution.

And then we declared war. According to longtime war correspondent Chris Hedges, war gives meaning like nothing else. Americans know war; we know how to make sense of things when we are at war. We honor the fallen, pray for soldiers, hang flags, supplement the national anthem with "America the Beautiful" and color guards and flyovers. Bush's declaration of war had the almost magical effect of transforming victims into heroes, terrorists into enemy soldiers, our passive mourning into active resolution, and our collective dread before God-knows-what into a clear mission to rid the world of evil.[3] There were some small casualties; for example, most of the international community sitting shiva with us collected their things and quietly departed. But by and large, to be at war was much more understandable and reassuring than the meaning-soaked meaningless grief from which we were emerging.

For the record, I hope that we beat COVID-19—kick the shit out of each small set of genes enclosed in fatty lipid molecules and armored with protein spikes. My concern is for the collateral damage to our collective character and individual dispositions that waging war can yield. Will we be patient and kind? Will we be able to truthfully accept and faithfully bear this tragedy, even as we try to conquer it? How will we care for those who cannot be cured—a question made painfully difficult by the six or more feet of space that could separate the dying from their families? How well will we grieve—privately in our homes, locally in shifts of ten, and collectively as a human race?

Trump continues to call the coronavirus "the Chinese virus." Am I right to hear echoes of "gooks" fought overseas or the "thugs" demonized in a war on drugs? If killing people requires their prior dehumanization, perhaps attacking a virus depends on its racialization. Already, too, speeches about containing COVID-19 include commands for a more militarized border security, lest a storm of sick immigrants infect us and strains our health care system.

These are some cracks in the armor, but the language of war mostly carries out its mission in garnering collective resolve, eradicating critique, and justifying the moral righteousness of those engaged. This goes for wars on diseases as well as on terrorists or criminals. In her profound work, *Glimpsing Resurrection*, Deanna Thompson, who was diagnosed with stage IV cancer in 2008, writes about how "those of us who live with cancer [often] are cast in the role of warriors called on to battle the cancer with all the ammunition we've got." Swapping out a story of battle for the lens of trauma, Thompson asks what it would mean to live well with loss. She writes about, and with, "a different, non-military focused vocabulary to talk about what it means to negotiate life with a serious illness."[4]

For two thousand years, Christians have found such countercultural scripts and practices in the raw lamentations of Job and the Psalms, in Jesus's difficult acceptance of death (complete with a cry from the cross), and in the acceptance of mortality during Ash Wednesday and the self-examination that follows during Lent. For just as long, Chinese culture has sought to "cultivate valley spirit," balancing an aggressive, masculine yang with a supple, feminine yin. Indeed, according to Daoism, the most powerful action is spontaneous nonaction—wu wei, the way of water, which cuts through rock by yielding so masterfully to it. Hindus and Jains practice *ahimsa* (literally, "noninjury"), and Buddhists attend to their breath, letting go of acquisitive desire, hatred, and ignorance. Islam literally means submission, and a Muslim is one who submits. There are plenty of stories and practices that would provide alternatives to war and war making, if we would just draw on their riches.[5]

I gave blood at our regional blood bank today, as I've done fairly regularly over the last several years. I was quick to make the appointment when they called asking for help; it didn't hurt that my kids were in the car listening to my response over Bluetooth. I keep my mind off the red tube attached to my left arm by tallying small acts of kindness alongside acts done out of fear and ignorance. I am giving blood—plus one point. It is, in part, to set an example for my kids rather than to do what is good

for goodness's sake—minus one point. The place is packed; beyond the regular row of older men giving platelets, a small line has formed of people wanting to donate blood, having heard that the need was especially high with the recent cancellation of blood drives in local schools—plus two points. While sipping apple juice and eating my granola bar, I overhear two workers discuss whether it was the cleaning crew who stole all the toilet paper from the supply closet—minus one point. Too early for a final score, but kindness seems to be leading at halftime.

* * *

Tonight is beautiful. The sun came out late in the day, its light dispersing throughout the early spring sky at twilight. It's that time when everything becomes more pronounced against the setting sun—almost surreal, as if we were cast in a colorized movie. There is more meaning against the horizon of this meaningless pandemic than I may be able to take in.

STOP