

Why Me?

Readings: 'New Year's Eve' by Carl Dennis

'This World is Not Conclusion' by Emily Dickinson

'I don't understand why this is happening to me. Why did my cancer come back? I have tried to live a good life. I'm not perfect, but I have done pretty well. My job is helping kids who have been abused and I work hard at it. I am good to my husband and my kids... and the cancer came back.' Alice told me this in a dark hospital room lit only by the TV playing Wheel of Fortune. Her cancer had metastasized to her brain and her bones and she was told earlier that day that she would likely die very soon. She was only 56 years old. 'I just don't understand' she continued. 'I just don't understand how God could let this happen to me. If God is all-powerful, why hasn't God stopped the cancer? If God is a loving father, why do I have cancer? I do everything I can to help my kids – why won't God parent me like that? If God is fair, why do I have cancer again? Why me? Why is my family suffering?'

She then turned to me, expectantly. I was her chaplain. I was the person in that hospital who was supposed to have answers to questions about God, suffering and meaning. What would you have said to Alice in that moment? How do you answer 'why me?' when it springs to your lips or is voiced by those around you? These questions and our struggles to answer them are the heart of what it means to be religious. While we may feel alone when we ask them, we are united with our brothers, sisters, and cousins who've been asking these questions for millennia.

Alice's questions are fundamentally about what kind of universe we live in. How do we make sense of this beckoning, baffling, world? Is the universe fair? Does everything happening for a reason? Is there a cause behind every effect? Is the universe random and indifferent, governed by chance and luck? Historian Jennifer Michael Hecht asserts that these questions show us a rupture in meaning in our world. In her book *Doubt: A History*, she writes,

Great believers and great doubters... are both awake to the fact that we live between two divergent realities: On one side, there is a world in our heads—and in our lives, so long as we are not contradicted by death and disaster—and that is the world of reason and plans, love, and purpose. On the other side, there is the world beyond our human life—an equally real world in which there is no sign of caring or value, planning or judgment, love or joy. We live in a meaning rupture because we are human and the universe is not.'

She continues, 'Great doubters, like great believers, have been people occupied with this problem, trying to figure out whether the universe actually has a hidden version of humanness, or whether humanness is the error and people would be better off weaning themselves from their sense of narrative, justice, and love, thereby solving the schism by becoming more like the universe in which they are stuck. Cosmology can be stunning in this context. It is meaningful to get to your wedding on time, to do well in the marathon for which you have been training, to not spill coffee on your favorite shirt. But if we take a few steps back from the planet Earth and from our tiny moment in history, we see a very different picture: the Earth is a ball of water and dirt

swarming with creatures, living and dying, passing in and out of existence, shifting around the continents. A few steps further back and we see planets coming into being, stars being born and dying, galaxies swarming in clusters across billions of years... From this perspective, the importance of a favorite shirt, a finish in the next marathon, and even whether you show up at your wedding—all of this begins to seem inconsequential. Concentrating on the macro-picture of reality is enough to make you sit down on a park bench and never get up again...'¹

And yet, the world is not full of people sitting on park benches refusing to get up. We are resilient. Somehow, we make sense of the rupture between the world we live in most of the time that seems filled with reason and purpose and the randomness of death and disaster that we cannot make sense of. Or we at least make peace with it enough to get through our day.

One way of explaining this meaning rupture comes to us from the religions of India – Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. These faiths have notions of karma. At its core, karma is the assertion that we live in a moral universe, a human universe. Everything happens for a reason. There is no chance. There is no good luck or bad luck. What goes around comes around and we reap what we sow. Everything that happens in our lives is a result of our previous actions.

So, what would this mean for Alice, the woman with recurrent cancer? Why is she dying so young and so painfully? Perhaps believers in karma could have traced her cancer to previous actions in this life. Perhaps Alice did something terrible enough to merit cancer and early death. Some believers in these traditions would assert that Alice's suffering is because of actions in a previous life. Perhaps her cancer and early death restore cosmic balance—she has worked through her karma, the debt she incurred—and she is now ready for a better incarnation. Ideas of karma and cause and effect are not only in Indian religions. Many who do not follow those wisdom traditions hold them too. If we find ourselves saying, "He really got what he deserved," we are claiming that the universe is moral.

Karma is a satisfying answer to 'why me' for some people. It works for many of the world's Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. But it also has serious shortcomings. When taken to its extreme, a belief in karma, a belief that leaves no room for chance, randomness and luck gets very close to blaming the victim. If only Alice had lived differently in this life or a previous one, she would not be suffering now. Karma is not just an explanation of illness. For example, some—not all—people who believe in karma believe that people are poor for a reason. They would assert that poverty is punishment, evidence of misdeeds in this life or a previous one. While blaming people for their own poverty is not unknown in this country, in places where the religions of India are prevalent it takes on a different form. Some assert that if the rule of karma is true, then letting people remain in dire poverty is a generous act, as it allows those who are poor to work through their karma, restore balance, and prepare themselves for a better reincarnation.

¹Hecht, Jennifer Michael. *Doubt: A History*. New York City: HarperCollins, 2010. page xii-xiii

Karma is a powerful idea, an idea that is rooted in the reality that we are all interconnected, but it was not the answer I gave to Alice that night.

The Judeo-Christian religious tradition answers 'why me?' in a different way. The Hebrew Bible's Book of Job is an exploration of the suffering of good people. The story of the good man who loses nearly everything and struggles to understand why is one of the oldest stories that humanity tells. Versions of this story were told among the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians. In the version of the story in the Hebrew Scriptures, Job, a good man, loses his wealth, his children, and his health. He asks 'why me?' The story's audience knows the cause for Job's suffering. At Satan's prompting, God decides to take away Job's wealth and wellness to see if he was only a good man because he had a good life. But Job, his wife, and his friends don't know this—so they do what we all do when faced with suffering. They try to make sense of it. Job's friends insist that Job must be guilty somehow, someway. They want the universe to be fair and insist that Job must have done something wrong to deserve all his losses. Job claims his innocence.

At the end of the story, after many arguments, God speaks to Job out of a whirlwind. God doesn't explain the bet with Satan. God says 'I am the creator and you are not. You cannot understand how and why I do what I do.' Then God gives Job wealth, health and ten new children. To many people, me included, God's answer to Job is profoundly unsatisfying. God sidesteps the issue. In Alice's room that night, I didn't want to sidestep the issue.

That night, I didn't invoke any of the world's great wisdom traditions. I didn't answer her questions with a discourse on karma or Job. I told Alice that I didn't have satisfying answers to her questions, that I joined her in her questions and understood her anger. I told her I wished I had some magic words that would somehow make what was happening to her and her family make sense. I told her that I believe these her questions are impossible to fully answer in a satisfying way. That doesn't mean that we didn't try in that dark hospital room. That doesn't mean that all of us keep trying to make sense of the meaning rupture in our world.

The tentative answer that I gave her is from the humanist tradition. I echoed the words of essayist David Rakoff, who died in 2012 also from recurrent cancer and also too young. He was 47. In *Half Empty*, the last book published in his lifetime, written when he knew that his death was near, he writes,

'It is the belief in the extra-soothing power of the universe that gets me since, as best as I can determine, the universe cares not one jot for you or me. It really doesn't. As the writer Melissa Bank points out, the only proper response to a tearful "Why me?" is sadly, "Why *not* you?" ... That can be a cold and lonely reality with which to contend, and one to which every one of us, even the most vinegar-soaked pessimist, is naturally resistant. We all spend our lives rejecting this truth and, consciously or not, entreating the universe—with its vast stretches of deep space, dark matter, and uncharted, immeasurable distances—to somehow align itself in sheer admiration of our fervor and gumption, to rain down precisely that which it is we wish for.

And the universe will say nothing.²

Rakoff and Bank answer 'why me?' with 'why not?' This is the answer I shared with Alice that day. This is the answer that is most true for me. Since we Unitarian Universalists are not bound together by shared belief – I expect and I hope that this is not the truest answer for all of you. And I would love to hear how you answer the questions 'why me?' Why am I suffering?

I wish that 'why not?' wasn't my best answer to 'why me?' I wish I could have confidently told Alice that there is some deeper meaning behind her cancer, some truth that given enough insight or time or meditation she could discover, but that is not the truth that I know or the world that I see. The truth that I know is that 'why not?' is the truest answer to why me? Everything doesn't happen for a reason. That what we reap is not what we sow. Illness afflicts the best people and the worst people. At some point, even though the answers still won't come, asking 'why me?' ceases to serve us. After perhaps raging against the indifference of the universe for quite a while, a shift happens. The most important question ceases to be 'why me?' and becomes 'now what?' How do I want to live with the reality I face?

Why me? Is in some way a plea to be protected from the realities of life. Human life is marked by suffering. None of us are exempt from pain. There is nothing that we can do to escape it. True, pain and suffering come in different forms and different magnitudes, but they inevitably come. As Westley, a character in *The Princess Bride* tells his beloved, "Life is pain, princess. Anyone who says differently is selling something."

Too often, we are told like Job is, that it is not our place to ask these important questions. But, it is our place to ask the hard questions, the ones we might not know the answer to. These are the questions that unite us as people. Our answers are different, but our questions are the same.

What are we left with? I wish I had a beautiful end for this sermon, that I could tell you that Alice actually made a full recovery or found answers or at least had made peace with all of her questions before she died. A few days after we spoke, Alice was discharged from the hospital. She went home into hospice care. A week after that, I saw her obituary in the newspaper. As far as I know, her questions were not answered. She died with them still on her lips. I ache for this story to be different. But I also know that a true story holds more wisdom than a beautiful fiction. To be religious is to wrestle with this baffling, beckoning world as it is and find what meaning we can, even if it is not the meaning we want. Alice's questions – like the similar questions that we ask in moments of despair and suffering—are brave and honest – and in their own particular way, beautiful. They hold a hard-earned beauty, a truth and resilience that is polished and refined by loss and tears.

May we keep asking and living questions.

² Rakoff, David. *Half-Empty*. New York: Anchor, 2011. page 25

May we keep searching for answers in traditions, in our communities, and in our own hearts.
May we find beauty and meaning and truth along the way.
May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.