

Indulgent Suffering

Interview with Dr. Jennifer Finlayson-Fife

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Sherrae: Within in the christian culture is a subtle desire for suffering and sacrifice. We see it as a way to determine if something is good and right. It's as if we believe that if there's suffering involved, it must be good and it must be God's will. Victor Frankl's talks extensively about suffering in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, and his message is that suffering can play a role in our lives to help us find meaning and purpose, which I agree with 100 percent. But then he also says, "But let me make it perfectly clear that in no way is suffering necessary to find meaning. To suffer unnecessarily is masochistic rather than heroic. It seems to be a trend within the Christian culture of seeking unnecessary suffering.

Jennifer: In Catholicism this is particularly pronounced. When I was a missionary in Spain, I saw masochism as a way of demonstrating spiritual superiority. It's strong in Latin culture, too, but I can speak mostly to the Spanish version of it which is that you demonstrate openly your suffering, as a way of showing devotion. Annually, they would have Holy Week in Spain, and many people would walk barefoot behind highly ornamented floats, wearing black, heads down, barefoot. It was overtly a way to honor God through suffering, but they were purposefully suffering. And I remember many of the Spanish people I knew or would teach would do "too much" for their families and then talk about, even glorify, their suffering because of it. So it was a virtue to be masochistic and it was absolutely conflated with goodness. Of course, we also do this in LDS culture but we don't explicitly honor it in the way I saw in Catholic culture.

Sherrae: That's interesting. It reminds me of when the Savior talked about fasting in the New Testament teaching to fast but not with a sad countenance making it obvious to everyone that you're "suffering".

Jennifer: Right exactly. Don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. Don't go around showing off to everybody. It's a form of self-aggrandizement in the name of selflessness. It's really a way of inflating your sense of self. It's highly self-absorbed. Masochism is strangely a very entitled position--- "I'm *owed* because I suffer *so much*. I'm owed people recognizing that I'm good and long-suffering, and I'm owed people doing what I want because of it. Or I'm owed God's blessing because I'm suffering." It's a kind of perverted form of entitlement even though it looks like the exact opposite.

Sherrae: So what's the kickback? What's the immediate gratification to the Christian that suffers unnecessarily? What's their, I don't want to say benefit, but what's their "benefit" from this kind of suffering?

Jennifer: I think there is at least two "benefits". First of all, it is, again, a way of looking superior through the self-abnegation. It's a way of giving up your desires in order to feel superior, whether internally or externally. "You give *so much*, you're so Christlike, you do everything for everybody". The idea is, "She's a good person because *she has no life*." So it is a way of trying to prove one's goodness through self-denial. These acts are not motivated by what is really needed, by what is necessary, or what is going to create goodness in any given situation.

In contrast, sometimes we make sacrifices when we're asking ourselves the question of *what is really needed*, because we want true goodness to happen. And sometimes, in order to do this, we might even suffer, and we might even suffer silently, (but it truly is silently). The reason why you do it is because you want to create a better reality, and you're doing your part. It's not for show, it's not to prove to anybody that *you're* good. It's about wanting to create something better, to affect a situation. It's about standing up for something you think is valuable, but giving up something else (your time, energy or other desires) in order to do it.

The second thing I think that motivates indulgent suffering, is it's very very tempting to do what everybody else wants you to do, so you can feel like you're a good person without having to define a life, define a self, define a purpose, and really stand for something. Yielding to the expectations that others place on you in many respects is easy because it's a way of not really doing the hard work of defining what is in fact good, what is important to you, who you are and who you want to be in the world. It's a way of basically saying "everybody else's demands are going to define my life". And there is a perceived safety in that. It's a way of copping out on the moral imperative given to each of us to define what's important, valuable, or good for us to offer the world. We use self-sacrifice as a way to hide. We can also feel superior because we're basically being taken from all the time, but it's a fake form of goodness, and it's very tempting for some of us.

Sherrae: It seems like that type of suffering, the unnecessary or indulgent suffering, the suffering that you're describing, it looks selfless but it's massively selfish. How would you help someone to recognize that what they're doing isn't selfless? I think it's so easy when you're in the position of the sufferer who's choosing into unnecessary suffering to

feel very validated. I think it would be hard to step back and see what's you're doing isn't selfless but selfish.

Jennifer: What I do is ask people (clients) why are they choosing what they are choosing? Is it for the greater good and is the greater good actually happening given their actions? Another way to assess is to look for resentment. Do you feel resentful and if so why? Because the resentment is often when we think we're owed something for our good work---You're owed people feeling good about you, or discerning and granting *your* desires, or you resent being taken advantage of even though your setting yourself up to be taken from. The person who's suffering out of a sense of purpose and deliberate action is not going to feel resentful.

Sherrae: It sounds like you're describing two qualities of suffering. There's the suffering that happens when it's indulgent and it looks and feels one way. But there is also suffering that come with virtuous acts. I don't think virtue is free from suffering but I feel like that type of suffering is different. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Jennifer: Well suffering is not a virtue in and of itself, although sometimes virtue *requires* suffering because the right act might include the sacrifice of something you value or want. But suffering shouldn't be considered a virtue in and of itself. It's just that you're willing to suffer, if you must, for the greater good to happen. Sometimes you have to give up desires of the self for the greater good, but that doesn't mean that giving up desires of the self is *always* good. But a lot of us have taken the perverted form that what is selfless is *always* good. What causes suffering is *always* good. And we want this kind of overt self-abnegation to be always good. And it clearly is not.

Sherrae: It seems like the way that you're talking about it, that choosing the unnecessary suffering is an easier path in the sense that it doesn't require as much thinking.

Jennifer: It doesn't require discernment and it looks selfless, but it's selfish. A person that suffers because they want the greater good is unselfish, because it's not about them. They're not thinking about the credit, they're thinking about their part in creating the greater good. The sufferer wants the credit, the Masochist, is self-preoccupied.

Sherrae: Which I think is very much shown in comparing and contrasting the Savior's and Satan's responses to the Father in the premortal council. Satan wanted all the honor and Christ said "the glory be thine".

Jennifer: That's right. I mean it is very much what Christ was critical of, that idea of doing things for show as opposed to the desire to create goodness.

Sherrae: What do you think is the antidote to indulgent suffering? How do you move past it and create something better?

Jennifer: This is where you lose yourself to find yourself. It is the idea that to find real peace within myself, I need to stop making everything all about me. So, for example, the mother who capitulates to everything in her marriage and with her children---she is in the process fostering an entitled spouse and entitled children. Well, here's the antidote: Is that good for your husband and your children? I mean, it's not good for the woman, but is it good for the children? Yield whenever they stamp their feet? No! In fact you aren't doing what your children *need* you to do. They need you to set a limit. They need you to say no, they need you to not be a martyr. Because in addition to fostering their entitlement, they'll also feel pressured to coddle or accommodate you for all your "suffering" on their behalf. You know, that line of "I gave birth to you for 20 hours and you won't do 'X'?! Because I have suffered you owe me." And so the question is, is this good for your child? Is it good to teach your child to either take advantage of you or have to take care of you because you suffer? No. It's not a virtue to not grow up or take more responsibility for your decisions because you are basically using the idea of your suffering to hijack your child's life. That's not a virtue. It's not good. It's actually a way of taking over. It's a way of basically not loving your spouse and a way of taking over your children's lives, although it may not look like it. The tyrant who's screaming and yelling and throwing things, you can track the way that they take advantage of their family very easily. But the ones who "selflessly" gives everything up, never stands up for themselves and are in a resentful, fearful position--They basically pressure their children to take care of them, stand up for and solve things for them. They take over their children's psyches. And that's a very very damaging position. And it is especially so because it's hard to track for what it is.

Sherrae: So in addition to being just hard to track, which I agree it is, what other things do you see happening that perpetuate that cycle, that even give value to it?

Jennifer: Well again, we've bought into the idea that suffering and selflessness are inherently good, so nobody can stand up to those behaviors because it seems crazy to ask someone not to do a supposedly "selfless" thing. And it can also be confusing that someone's selfless sacrifices (that in reality feel obligating or martyr-like) make you so frustrated. The people around the masochistic person often have a hard time telling them to "knock it off" because it is seen as good by so many, when it is a way of

obligating everyone. And so it gets confusing. It's a little bit like the realtor that sends you gifts and you feel now obligated to hire them. It's a way of hijacking you because you feel sorry they've done all these things for you, so now it would be wrong to not invite them to something, hire them, etc.. So that's the other upside for the masochist, it looks selfless but it's a way of obligating people around them to take care of them. It's the idea that someone is so good, how could you say no to them? Or, they are so weak, how could you say no to a fragile person---particularly given that they don't ever do anything for themselves? They only do things for others so they have no strength. Therefore you ought to take care of them.

Sherrae: One thing I see that also contributes to this toxic cycle is, for example, the husband that praises his wife's "generosity", that unhealthy type of "generosity". And I think that complicates it.

Jennifer: Absolutely. It does. It gets a lot of credit in the Mormon female world. You know, "She runs around and does it all! Bless her heart! Such a sweet person." She's certainly not a threat. It is a way of getting high cultural marks, high social marks. It is kind of obligating and you sort of adore it and many of us put it on a pedestal.

Sherrae: Is like the characteristic we all adore but none of us want to emulate.

Jennifer: Nobody really wants to emulate and nobody is really intimate with that person because she's so unwilling to really be known because she doesn't have a self to know.

Sherrae: Right. And I think we take advantage of that person to the point that it benefits us but that's as far as we like it.

Jennifer: Oh absolutely. When you need something, it's super handy to have that kind of a friend. But you know that when it comes time to really hang out with her it can be hard because she often doesn't have a sense of self. So everything that you say she might agree with. Or perhaps whenever she's in conversation with you she wants advice and input because she never dares to make decisions on her own. And so it's actually kind of hard to spend time with someone who hasn't developed her own sense of self. And then your avoidance of this kind of nice or needy person can make you feel guilty because you're like, "Gosh, she does all these nice things for me and she always says nice things to me." But I sort of get bored or feel frustrated talking to her because I feel like she just will mirror whoever she's with, and you don't feel like you really know that person. And so people like that can be kind of confusing actually. You wonder, "Why do

I feel anger at this super nice person?" But it's hard to track the way they take advantage because they look so much like the opposite on the outside.

Sherrae: It seems to all comes down to this development of self. How would you define what it means to have a sense of self?

Jennifer: I do think a sense of self is, at the core, based in desire. I talk about this in my Art of Desire course. A sense of self is in its core about being willing to forge a self, like literally craft a self in the world. What are my gifts and what do I want to develop with them? Who do I want to be in the world? Developing our capacities is really to be able to have a sense of power---not the power to manipulate others or obligate others or to get others to think you're good. It's the power to effect goodness in the world. To make something better than the way you found it. It's the ability to be creative. It's the ability to develop your capacities in a way that you can actually make a meaningful difference in the life of your child, your spouse, yourself, and in society. It's to be a force for good in the world. That's what it is to have a self. It's being a force for good in a way that's specific to your creation and to your capacities, and thereby developing into a unique and creative self. In my mind this is not the way that many Latter-Day Saints talk about choices and doing good. We tend to focus more around a pre-determined plan in God's mind that you need to ascertain and fulfill. Sometimes we look too much to be commanded in all things.

My way of thinking about it is more to trust in God and goodness enough to be anxiously engaged in any good cause, in your own unique way, and tolerating the inherent exposure and uncertainty in it, while still trying to do good anyway. It requires sacrifice. And it does require doing things that feel hard and without any guarantee that it's all going to work out. It's the ability to tolerate that you don't know how it will all work, but having the willingness to move forward anyway. That's what it takes to forge a self. Who am I going to be in my relationship to this person?---Not necessarily who they are going to be, because I don't have control over that. It's not necessarily that any challenge we've been given has a predetermined purpose to it. I just see it more as we must choose a purpose in the midst of the difficulty. Such as, "This difficulty is just another version of the human experience and I am going to love and do the heavy lifting to try and create something better here even though there's a lot that's not clear or certain."