

Session 3: Pain and Pleasure: “Hooked on Control”

Prior Reading

Having read through the introduction to Bowler’s book and Singer’s essay, what stands out to you? Was there a particular line or idea, maybe even a key word for you? Was there a story that sticks with you? Was there something that gave you pause?

Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, pp. xi-xviii.
Peter Singer, “Can We Increase Gross National Happiness?”

Quotes

Read through the following quotes, selecting a few of the ones that most appeal to you. Reflect on what they say to you and why you selected those particular quotes.

“Control is a drug, and we are all hooked, whether or not we believe in the prosperity gospel’s assurance that we can master the future with our words and attitudes.”

-Kate Bowler

“To be human is to be downtrodden and struggling against the odds, whatever those odds might be.”

-Serene Jones

“There is a certain pleasure in weeping.”

-Ovid

“In the World to Come, each one of us will be taken to task not for our sins or misdeeds, but for all the good that our eyes saw, but of which we did not eat.”

-Traditional Jewish Teaching

“Whether my inner life went well or badly, my discovered strength stood peacefully outside looking on and knew that light and dark were closely related, and that sorrow and peace were rhythm, part and spirit of the same great music.”

-Hermann Hesse

“Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, stressors and love, adventure, risk, and uncertainty.”

-Nassim Nicholas Taleb

“I had always imagined God to be in the same general direction as everything else that I valued: up.... I had to be forced underground before I could understand that the way to God is not up but down.”

-Parker Palmer

“Joy is much bigger than happiness. While happiness is often seen as being dependent on external circumstances, joy is not.”

-Desmond Tutu

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

-Apostle Paul

“The person who has had more experience of hardships can stand more firmly in the face of problems than the person who has never experienced suffering. From this angle, then, some suffering can be a good lesson for life.”

-Dalai Lama

“Happiness, then, in its full extent, is the utmost pleasure we are capable of, and misery the utmost pain: and the lowest degree of what can be called ‘happiness’ is so much ease from all pain, and so much present pleasure, as without which any one cannot be content.”

-John Locke

“It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.”

-David Steindl-Rast

“True happiness comes from the joy of deeds well-done, the zest of crating things new.”

-Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

“If we look at the world with a love of life, the world will reveal its beauty to us.”

-Daisaku Ikeda

“In many ways, hedonism is the default philosophy of most people and certainly has become the dominant view of consumer ‘shop till you drop’ culture.”

-Douglas Abrams

“To reject the ‘pleasure, beauty, and truth’ that can be found in creation, as Augustine said he had to do in order to understand the divine, is not an argument for God. It’s an argument against God.”

-Timothy Egan

“Every time we make the judgment *this ought not to have happened*, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil.”

-Susan Neiman

“The joy that is of God is not opposed to earthly pleasures. Rather it infuses them with a foundation for meaning.”

-William Sloane Coffin

“To be a human being among people and to remain one forever, no matter in what circumstances, not to grow despondent and not to lose heart — that’s what life is all about, that’s its task.”

-Fyodor Dostoyevsky

“In the feast, life is not produced but demonstrated.”

-Jürgen Moltmann

“We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination.”

-C. S. Lewis

“Think occasionally of the suffering of which you spare yourself the sight.”

-Albert Schweitzer

“Joy is a reality best understood in the ‘middle voice’—that is, a reality that is not purely passive, happening to us, nor simply active, something we do; but partaking of both receptivity and dynamism.”

-Charles Matthews

“Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood.”

-Zora Neale Hurston

“No one is ever holy without suffering.”

-Evelyn Waugh

“The knowledge of the fallen world does not kill joy, which emanates in this world always, constantly, as a bright sorrow.”

-Alexander Schmemmann

“If you want to be happy, be.”

-Leo Tolstoy

“The horror of cancer has made everything seem like it is painted in bright colors. I think the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.”

-Kate Bowler

“Joy and pain, they are but two arteries of the one heart that pumps through all those that don’t numb themselves to really living.”

-Ann Voscamp

“I think it is very good when people suffer. To me that is like the kiss of Jesus.”

-Mother Teresa

“Buddha says there are two kinds of suffering: the kind that leads to more suffering and the kind that brings an end to suffering.”

-Terry Tempest Williams

“No matter what we possess or experience and irrespective of how we act, if we miss joy, we have missed all.”

-Miroslav Volf

“Our tears are sacred. They water the ground around our feet so that new things can grow.”

-Rob Bell

“The real crisis of our being, if we would only reflect on it, is that we are given too much, not too little, that we are made for a joy we are tempted to reject because we cannot imagine it.”

-James Schall

“When we are crushed like grapes, we cannot think of the wine we will become.”

-Henri Nouwen

“All of the abstract answers to human pain, any of them can sound convincing—until you suffer, or meet someone who is suffering.”

-Elie Wiesel

“Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less? That is, I think, finally, the only real question.”

-Julian Barnes

“Start worrying. Details to follow.”

-Traditional Jewish saying

Questioning and Wrestling (Q and W)

The first list below names some of the larger questions we will wrestle with in our session. There are also questions posted from the readings we did in advance. Take a few moments to reflect on these in preparation for group discussion. The other questions listed will make more sense after the plenary session.

Living the Questions

If happiness is one of life's pursuits, what does happiness look like?

Are happiness and joy the same, different, what exactly?

Is the good life one of comfort? Can suffering be part of a life worth living?

Is a positive attitude enough to provide happiness?

How does one live in joy while so many suffer?

How does your social location affect your views? What about the pandemic?

Kate Bowler Reading

On your own journey, what has been your exposure to prosperity gospel thinking and organized religion? What do you make of the two attractions she notes, flourishing but also desperation to be whole? Can you identify with these longings in your own life, or the lives of people you know? What difference does it make to refer to theodicy as a mystery vs. problem? What kinds of suffering have you or others you know undergone, and how might that experience affected your/their views on suffering? How do you think age and life experience affects one's views on topics like suffering? Why do you think people are quick to offer reasons for the suffering of others? What is the difference between talking about suffering abstractly vs. amidst the pain? How might we be sensitive to views of others?

Peter Singer Reading

Do you think happiness can be objectively measured? What role do you think health, standard of living, and education play?

James Schall's *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs*

Do you believe that humans are made for joy? Is that our default setting? Do you think we reject such joy due to a lack of imagination?

Anne Lamott's *Help, Thanks, Wow*

What have you experienced lately that was a "wow" moment? How might you describe such moments of ecstasy? Why do you think they occur so infrequently? Or do they?

Rabbi Shimshon and the Alps

Have you seen the Alps? Do you think of enjoying earth's beauty as a kind of mandate, divine or otherwise?

David Brooks on Conspiracy

Do you think of certain aspects of your life as working against joy rather than toward it (family of origin, education, occupation, social circle)?

Evil and Suffering

Does it help you to distinguish evil (perpetrated by others) and suffering (that which has no human agency)?

Augustine and Denying Ourselves Pleasure

Do you think of pleasure as somehow tainted? Were you brought up to consider joy as less than?

Haidt's Adversity Hypothesis

What do you make of the difference between his weak version of suffering (it *can* strengthen us) and the strong version (we *must* suffer to grow)?

Penultimate Joy

In a world of suffering, do you feel guilty for experiencing joy?

Quotes

Which of the quotes in this week's handout caught your attention? What are your thoughts on those quotes to which you were drawn? Were there quotes that troubled you?

Suggested Further Reading

If you decide to read more on the topic of pain and pleasure, here are some suggested titles.

Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*

Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*

James Schall, *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs*

Miroslav Volf and Justin Crisp, eds., *Joy and Human Flourishing*

Elie Wiesel, *Night, Dawn, Day*