

CHARLYNE GELT, PH.D.

Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



The Paradox of Suffering by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

“*The Only Way Out is Through*” — Robert Frost

Grief, loss, and suffering have been a universal experience from the beginning of time. As I write this, there is great suffering going on in the state of Texas as the result of Hurricane Harvey, as well as other kinds of suffering (war; poverty; starvation) in other parts of the world. Certain suffering experiences we cannot control. Other losses, including those that go on in our own families, can move us towards a journey of self-discovery and transformation.



What is often misunderstood about suffering is that it encompasses a paradox: Within the worst forms of suffering often lie hidden clues to a fuller life. By walking *through* our pain, allowing ourselves to feel it instead of side-stepping or running away from it, we open ourselves up to discovering the secret language which can lead us to innumerable positive outcomes we never imagined possible.

The Only Way Out is Through

Depth psychology tells us to open ourselves up to suffering, to *experience* the “*dark night of the soul*,” feel it, face it, and evolve from it. Dealing with suffering head-on can turn out to be a journey of self-discovery, of finding light within the darkness, which ultimately becomes a source of great richness, even transformation. An *inner* excursion into personal suffering may force us to face the consequences and restrictions of our own limiting belief systems and behaviors, and the steep price we’ve been paying for avoidance in terms of self-punishment (self-criticism, self-judgment, self-blame, and fear of risk-taking) to lost joy, creativity, happiness, and connection. Generally, we are unaware of what we’ve been missing until grief and loss hits us like a hammer, then we clear away the boulders, the obstacles, and see what’s around the bend.

The Alchemy of Suffering

The Alchemists studied nature to learn how to turn matter into “gold.” Alchemy’s attempt to discover “hidden gold” can be understood as a *metaphor* for the process of self-discovery of our own buried psychic “gold.” Alchemy provides an ancient map of the stages in the individuation process: our journey to wholeness. Such a map can help orient people in their therapeutic work. “Cooking” unwanted material to generate something new, finding light within the darkness, is a transformative process that turns matter into gold.

Personal Suffering

Suffering occurs on multiple levels: large scale (floods, wars, famine) and on a personal level. It may involve our work, our finances, our health, our families, or our personal relationships, such as marriage. A toxic relationship causes deep suffering. It can drain us of our aliveness and sense of *self*. For example, if a man suffers because his wife has left him and then he deals with it by numbing the pain with alcohol, he keeps himself stuck in a victim position. He is not suffering; he is avoiding the pain; he is not learning how he got there in the first place.

Invisible but Invaluable

Another example is Anne, a 50-year-old housewife and mother, who was driven by her excessive *need to be needed*. Her main obstacle or “dysfunction” in life was her excessive need to be needed. The root of this behavior was grounded in her family of origin. While she made herself *invaluable* — she also made herself invisible. What looked like a good thing, blocked her own growth. Remaining behind the scenes, she helped others grow, but was unaware of her own needs, including love and validation. (Psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D., points out other needs: such as respect, belonging, autonomy, and validation.)

To grow from her suffering, Anne had to face (not deny) the painful truth: Though she *believed* she was content to make other people look good, she wasn't. She experienced feelings of anxiety, impatience, and resentment. She was short-changing herself. Once she became willing to shift out of her comfort zone and experience the pain of all she had been missing in her marriage, she was able to consider creating change. “Up to a point, I was okay with a relationship that lacked communication and replicated the frustrations and hurts I'd witnessed in my family growing up. It was a real comfortable old shoe. But then one day I realized, “No, that's not comfortable at all. No more! No thank you. Not appreciated!” With this in mind, I set out on a quest to learn everything I could about self-acceptance.”

Having a Plan

Change and personal development involves suffering. To think otherwise is self-deception. Though we want change, our internalized beliefs often prevent it, which causes anxiety. Growth, change, inner evolution generally means letting go of the familiar thinking, forming new habits, and a searching for new resources. Immobilized by fear and helplessness, results in resentment, frustration, emotional slavery, and personal stagnation.

A convincing, detailed *plan for personal change* moves us forward and leaves grief and suffering behind. It is a new path that reawakens hope and unleashes new energy previously trapped by learned helplessness and negativity. Create the plan that maximizes your best potential.

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