

# Marriage and Family Corner

Mary McKinney | Posted: Monday, May 4, 2015 1:18 pm

Childbirth has been used often as a metaphor for transformative experiences — it is often said that labor pains are forgotten after a baby is brought into the world. Being one of the lucky women whose labors resulted in new lives, I can attest that I remember the pain clearly and that “labor” is an appropriate word for it.

Even so, I recall the first sights of my perfect daughters far more vividly and far more often than I remember the pain and fear. Giving birth changed me. I gained a new understanding of the difference between pain and suffering, as well as of my ability to deal with it and grow from it.

During the birth of my second child, my fear escalated as the intense contractions continued. A gruff nurse told me to calm down to handle the pain. I don't remember her exact words now, but, her message was very clear and I followed the orders she barked.

To my amazement, when I purposefully calmed, my pain became tolerable. I was grateful to that nurse, because relaxing with the pain worked so much better than the “white knuckle” approach I had been trying.

It would be nice to say that I have never had to relearn that lesson, but it would be far from true. Instead, it is a lesson with many levels — and one I have learned many times.

Every woman's experience of childbirth and the way it changes her is unique. Likewise, every person experiences pain, navigates it and is changed by it in different ways.

Sometimes pain is so great that it seems intolerable and becomes suffering. Other times, it doesn't.

The content and timing of the “lessons” in this navigation of pain are also personal. However, there does seem to be some universality to the idea that when pain is avoided, through denial or resistance, it heightens suffering.



A Labor of Love

Alternatively, when it is dealt with more readily and in a more accepting manner, often, the suffering can be lessened.

Many religions include some form of this thinking. They also inform practices that can help in dealing with pain.

Regardless of personal belief, an understanding of the commonalities between many major religions can be useful.

For example, Christians are urged to turn worries and fears into prayers and praise. Buddhists are asked to understand and deal with suffering, including that notion that compassion (for others and for self) brings awakening.

Many leaders in mental health and other fields have written also about this concept. One of my favorite quotes is from Haruki Murakami, in “What I Talk About When I Talk About Running:” He wrote, “Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.” With this mindset, the definition of suffering includes the pain about feeling pain and the sense that it cannot be managed.

Viktor Frankl, a neurologist and psychiatrist, was the founder of logotherapy, which is a form of existential analysis. He asserted that our primary motivation in life is to have meaning.

In “Man’s Search for Meaning,” Frankl described his experiences during the Holocaust, including the deaths of his wife and parents. In this book, he wrote, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

Through such a change, he included, it is possible that in some ways, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.

The Buddhist idea that suffering is a “gateway” to compassion, for oneself and for others, highlights the thread that runs through these ideas.

When suffering, making changes in our thoughts and choices can be the gateway to compassion. Compassion can lead to a different meaning and may stop, or decrease, suffering, even when pain continues.

Compassionate response to suffering is transformative. So, comparing childbirth to other transformations, through suffering, holds true. In that way, we have all “given birth” to a heightened sense of meaning for our lives, including meaning for the pain.

Happy Mother’s Day to all who have labored to bring transformation into our own lives — and into the lives of other people. May we all celebrate new life and compassion.

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