

PAIN, THE UNWANTED GIFT

By BERNIE SIEGEL, MD

At workshops I frequently ask people if they would like to be free of all pain; emotional and physical. However, I tell those who sign up for what they think will be a gift to take my phone number with them so when they experience the problems associated with feeling no pain they can call and cancel the supposed gift.

Think about lepers and diabetics with peripheral neuropathy who are losing their limbs because they cannot feel infections or injuries. Then think about our feelings and emotions and how important it is to respond to them. I grew up with a mother whose advice about every problem was always the same, "Do what will make you happy." She taught me to deal with feelings so today I have happy depressions. When I am hungry I seek nourishment and when I feel gnawing unrest or other painful emotions I seek the changes in my life which will resolve the unhealthy and painful feelings. Mondays we have more heart attacks, suicides, strokes and illnesses. Perhaps if we responded to our feelings and changed our lives or attitudes Monday would not threaten our health.

I experience pain but I do not suffer. To me pain is a necessity, if I am going to define myself and my life, but suffering an option. Suffering relates to the emotional needs of the individual which are not being met. When the pain has no meaning and does not lead to healing of the person's life the individual suffers greatly. We have to realize that life is a labor pain of self birthing. When the pain is something we choose to experience to help us grow it hurts far less than the meaningless pain imposed upon us by others, including health care provider's treatments and prescriptions.

I work with people's drawings, and two people draw may the same treatment, with one showing it as hell and the other as heaven. If surgery is a mutilation and the drawing of the operating room shows a black box with a patient in it but no one caring for them, versus a life saving gift from God showing flowers and the surgeon caring for the patient, the post-operative recovery will demonstrate the difference. I have done major surgery upon people who awaken and say, "I have no pain. I am a little sore." I explained to the nurses to please stop writing, "Patient refuses pain medication" in their chart and write that the patient had no pain.

Studies reveal that when you put your hand in a bucket of ice and keep it there as long as possible you will keep it in the ice longer if loved ones are standing by your side than if you are alone; and probably even longer if your dog is there. In one study women who were given loving care during child birth had half the number of Cesarean Sections and a fraction of the need for epidurals than women given good technical care but shown no compassion during labor.

I also know from personal experience with a back injury that when I was operating, or painting a portrait, two activities where I lost track of time and was being loving and creative I was not aware of my pain. When I stopped either activity I needed to lie down

due to the pain I was now aware of. I think any activity which makes you lose track of time is the healthiest state one can ever be in.

A few years ago I was visiting a neurologist friend's office. In a darkened examining room was a woman who had a severe migraine headache and was awaiting transportation to the hospital. I went in to talk to her and asked her, "How would you describe the pain you are feeling?" She answered, "It's a burden, like pressure." If she were my patient I would have asked, "What else in your life fits those words and is a burden causing you pressure?" Instead I did some guided imagery with her to alleviate the burden and pressure in her life.

I then left her in the dark to rest. A few minutes later the office nurse came in to tell me the woman's headache was gone and she was headed home. "And by the way the burden is her marriage." I have had others answer with words like; draining, sucking, failure, road block and say, "Thank you" and walk off with a smile of enlightenment on their face.

It is also important to realize people hear you in coma, under anesthesia and while asleep. As my patients awakened after surgery I would say, "You will wake up comfortable, thirsty and hungry." It worked so well many of them gained weight after surgery because they were always hungry.

Major abdominal surgery can be done under hypnosis and even acupuncture. To me this simply reveals the power of the mind to control pain and how personal a sensation it can be.

I do not blame the patient or deny the many painful syndromes that require medications and various anesthetic therapies but I am saying that one cannot separate the sensation from the individual and their life and beliefs. Two people with the same affliction do not necessarily experience and suffer the same degree of pain.

As I said earlier when we see life as a labor pain of self birthing the pain becomes meaningful and at that time is no longer seen as a curse, and for some it becomes a blessing because of how it redirects their life to find nourishment for their body and soul. But when we are experiencing pain because of a prescribed treatment or a family telling us what we must go through to not die we are in big trouble. We need to keep our power and find meaning in what we choose to do. I find support groups are very helpful because the natives are able to share with each other and not be told what to do by the tourists.

Let me close with a poem I received several years ago:

Nine months seems like a long time
I watch my body change
Tired I sit staring out at life
I live within my mind
Books and music transport me beyond my body

Nine months finally pass
I give birth to my child
All the discomfort and pain is now justified

Chemotherapy and radiation
Twelve months seems like a long time
I watch my body change
Tired I sit staring out at life
I live within my mind
Books and music transport me beyond my body
Twelve months finally pass
I give birth to myself
All the discomfort and pain is now justified.