

I grew up in a very conservative Christian religious tradition. I went to a Southern Baptist Church during my childhood, then a Church of God during my adolescent years. So I have heard my share of fire and brimstone sermons. As entertaining as those may be, I'm sorry to say I won't be delivering one this morning. I've come to talk about what some might call "Hell on earth" – that suffering we experience in our day-to-day lives.

Suffering has long been a part of the human condition. Sometimes, it has been man-made suffering: the family goes hungry because enough food wasn't gathered or a neighboring tribe invades. Sometimes, suffering has been brought on by nature: droughts, floods, lightning storms.

As long as there has been suffering, there have been attempts to explain it. In some cultures, suffering, especially from the work of nature, has been blamed on demons or spirits or other malign magical beings. In some belief systems, suffering is just a result of bad luck. In others, it is a just punishment for wrongdoing by the sufferer, or maybe even the sufferer's ancestors. One thing is constant, though: to be human is to experience pain and suffering. As the character Albus Dumbledore says in the book *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, "...suffering like this proves you are still a man! This pain is part of being human—"

So, pain and suffering are universal. But what does this have to do with hell? Well, with a belief system that doesn't include a physical or spiritual realm of eternal punishment, what is hell but the pain and suffering we experience in our daily lives?

Sometimes our suffering is caused by nature, just as it was in ancient times: floods, droughts, thunderstorms. Sometimes it is caused by others: robberies, assaults, wars. Sometimes it comes from thing in the course of life: disease, injuries, deaths. Then there is that other type of suffering. So often, we punish

ourselves for crimes, real or imagined. How many times do we find ourselves saying things like “I’m such an idiot for doing that” or “How could I do something so selfish”? How many times do we beat ourselves up for mistakes we have made? To me, this is the worst of all types of suffering because it is self inflicted.

William Shakespeare wrote this:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

MacBeth, Act V, Scene 5

Many times in Shakespeare’s tragedies, characters seem to be experiencing a worldly hell. MacBeth, Hamlet, Prospero, Titus Andronicus, all are suffering, some at their own hand, some from punishments doled out by others. I think we all experience these types of hell from time to time. Maybe it’s the guilt that comes when you don’t spend enough time with relatives or close friends. Maybe it’s the worry about those bills that are coming due soon. More often for me, it’s that nagging voice in the back of my mind, asking those questions: “How could you be so stupid?” “How could you be so selfish?” “Why did you fly off the handle like that?”

We punish ourselves more severely than any other person could ever punish us. It is said we are our own worst critics, and I believe that to be true. The human mind is both wondrous and terrible. It can create beautiful works of art, and tear itself apart with grief and depression.

Let's talk about the ways our mind works against us, putting us through hell on earth. First, I want to talk about depression. Depression is a serious medical condition, and it shows just how much power our mind has. It is first and foremost a psychological disorder, perhaps caused by a chemical imbalance, but it can cause symptoms throughout the body, from changes in appetite to disruption of sleep patterns to physical pain. There are various treatments for depression, from chemicals to meditation. But depression is a very real example of hell on earth. Ask any person who has ever suffered from depression what hell is, and they can probably give you a very detailed answer.

Next, let's talk about grief. Grief can be caused by many things: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, a destructive house fire. We all grieve in our own ways, but one thing remains constant in grief: pain. I lost my father when I was nine years old. I'm twenty-eight now. For nineteen years, I have grieved for my father. Yeah, sometimes it goes away, and I don't think about him for days, maybe even weeks at a time, but it always comes back. And, when it does come, I can no more stop it than I could stop a speeding freight train. Grief is a very real cause of suffering in my life, and yes, I would call it hellish at times.

Finally, let's talk about that sneaky evil-doer, self punishment. Some people take this so far as to physically harm themselves, but I want to stick to those mental beatings we inflict on ourselves. It happens all the time. You make a mistake, hurt someone, or just do something stupid, and those questions I mentioned earlier start up in your mind: "How could I do that?" "Why did I do that?" etcetera. Then the mental self-flagellation begins. "I am worthless" "I am bad" "I am evil for doing that".

At times like these, it's a good idea to relax, try to stop punishing yourself, and realize that you're only human, with human failings. Remember that you are not all bad, just as you are not all good. No human is. Remember that being human is a great thing to be, even if it does come with its failures and disappointments.

How can we bring ourselves out of these types of hell? Never underestimate the power of human contact. Sometimes all the salve our poor souls need is that touch of human kindness. How often have you been having a horrible day, and someone does just one small kindness that completely turns things around for you? Maybe they opened a door for you when you had your hands full, or maybe they helped you pick up things you had dropped, or maybe they let you in front of them in traffic. See how small, simple acts of kindness can completely change your outlook, even bring you “out of the flames”?

This is why it is good to a part of a community. This church is a community, and you can find that balm of human contact here every week. Maybe your workplace is a community, and you have that one special coworker who can always brighten your day. Your home is also a community. Maybe it's your spouse who can lift your spirits, or a child. Even the family pet can fill in – dogs and cats are almost human, anyway, right?

Meditation, relaxation, and simple positive thinking can help, too. Sit in a quiet place and meditate, using whatever mantra you want. You could even use our responsive reading from today. And try to always think positively, even when you make a mistake. “I did a bad thing, but that doesn't make me a bad person.”

So, maybe you don't believe in a literal hell with a lake of fire and eternal punishments, but we can all relate to that hell on earth of depression, self-punishment, worries, and hardships. And we all have the means to escape that hell – meditation, relaxation, positive thinking, and human contact. Don't forget that you're experiencing something common to the human race, and don't forget to reach out that hand of human kindness yourself. You might just be pulling someone else out of their own “lake of fire”.