

Catharsis  
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I started thinking about *catharsis* after listening to an interview with Bryan Doerries, who runs a non-profit called Theater of War. Doerries studied theater and classics and has found a powerful and unique way of helping communities in the present, with ancient stories. He explains that Aristotle understood “*catharsis* to mean ‘the purification of potentially dangerous emotions, such as pity and fear, of their toxicity,’ rather than ‘the complete eradication of these emotions.’”<sup>1</sup> Doerries writes:

...Perhaps tragedy aimed to arouse powerful responses, including pity and fear, in or to facilitate a healthy and balanced response to personal suffering and the suffering of others. The Greeks championed the philosophical concept *sophrosyne*, or “healthy, balanced mind,” epitomized by moderation, temperance, and self-control. Perhaps tragedy was a means of reestablishing *sophrosyne* in the Athenian populace, which for whatever reasons—repeated exposure to war, pestilence, or death—had careened off balance; perhaps it was a ritualized and communal method of mitigating the cumulative effects of chronic stress and prolonged exposure to trauma...By bringing about *catharsis*, purifying Athenians of toxic levels of stress hormones, the tragedies restored balance—*sophrosyne*—to the autonomic nervous systems of individual citizens as well as to the body politic of Athens.<sup>2</sup>

After learning about the struggle of the U.S. military to meet the needs of soldiers and veterans at Walter Reed Medical Center, and around the country, Dorries set about finding a group of military leaders would would be willing to try something outside the box. He launched Theater of War, bringing new translations of the tragedies *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to military communities to invite conversations about the invisible wounds of war. The plays were written around 400 BC, by Sophocles, a retired general himself, about gods and heroes who were *ancient* to the people of Athens. They were performed for the community, for citizen soldiers, in the midst of decades long wars. *Ajax* is the story of Greek general who has invisible wounds of war, and in despair and anger at military leaders, loses control and slaughters a field of animals, thinking they are the people who have betrayed him, and then takes his own life. *Philoctetes* is the story of a soldier who is injured and abandoned on an island by his own troops, living alone for years in suffering. Doerries believes that these plays, shared in community 2500 years ago, in a time of war, to a community of citizen soldiers and military leadership, served an important role in helping communities process their experience then, and can today.

Over the last eight years, Doerries has worked with actors to bring readings of these plays, and others, to tens of thousands of soldiers, corrections officers, mental health workers, physicians, and communities of people living through trauma. Each performance is merely an opening to a long and thorough, facilitated community conversation. It has changed and saved lives and families. The plays and characters are from a different time and context, providing a safer entry to the story than if they were drawn from current experience, and yet, the words that

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1 Bryan Doerries, *Theater of War*, 2015, p.36

2 Ibid.

come from the mouths of the characters, could come from someone in pain today. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is tortured and left alone on a rocky prison because he broke Zeus' rule and gave fire to the humans. Near the end of the play he taunts his captors saying:

So let the lightning  
lash me from above;  
let mighty thunder  
rattle the heavens  
and whip up the gales;  
let a swirling storm  
uproot the earth and  
send giant waves  
crested skyward  
into the orbits of  
the stars and spheres;  
let him pick up my  
broken body and  
cast it into the darkness  
of Tartarus

I will stand in the eye  
of the storm, staring  
down Necessity,  
but my spirit shall  
never be broken.<sup>3</sup>

By using the plays as they were originally intended, to bring ancient stories to life in communities under stress, Dorries has brought new life to work that is often seen as overwrought, or irrelevant to modern experience. This work has spoken to me so strongly in part, because of our Unitarian Universalist relationship to ancient texts, especially Hebrew and Christian scriptures. While most Unitarian Universalists do not understand the Bible to be proscriptive, a book of rules and beliefs that we must follow, we continue to wrestle with the text, seeking the threads of human experience that relate to us today, to offer common language to connect with human experience over time, and to bring wisdom and challenge that human beings have experienced for thousands of years to bear on our own struggles and pain. The Bible is full of tragedy and violence, which some modern readers may choose to avoid, but looking with new eyes, could offer an opportunity for *catharsis*, for restoring balance to feelings of pain and fear, by sharing stories that mirror back to the reader, the experience of human suffering.

The Biblical character that first comes to mind when thinking of suffering is probably Job. It is thought to be the oldest book of the Bible, and is rich in unique imagery and story. Who can tell me the nutshell of the story of Job? [God and ha-satan, the adversary, talk and ha-satan suggests that if Job had everything taken from him he would curse God, and would not be so righteous. Then he loses his family, wealth, and health. He has three friends who listen to Jobs suffering and give bad advice. Then Job offers his case to God, who answers from a

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3 Ibid. 179.

whirlwind. Job does not curse God, but does ask why he suffers without cause, and then his health, wealth, and family are restored.] Job was not only cut off from his family and friends by losing some of them to death but because of the condition of his body, he was cut off from relationship with society, which had strict rules about health and purity.<sup>4</sup> So when Job loses his health, after losing his family, he is not able to turn to his community for support. He has the three terrible friends, but all they can tell him is that he must have done something wrong to deserve all this suffering. Job calls out to God to help him not only because he believed God might answer, but because he was out of other options.

#### Chapter 30

- 16 ‘And now my soul is poured out within me;  
days of affliction have taken hold of me.
- 17 The night racks my bones,  
and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.
- 18 With violence he seizes my garment;\*  
he grasps me by\* the collar of my tunic.
- 19 He has cast me into the mire,  
and I have become like dust and ashes.
- 20 I cry to you and you do not answer me;  
I stand, and you merely look at me.
- 21 You have turned cruel to me;  
with the might of your hand you persecute me.
- 22 You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it,  
and you toss me about in the roar of the storm.
- 23 I know that you will bring me to death,  
and to the house appointed for all living.
- 24 ‘Surely one does not turn against the needy,\*  
when in disaster they cry for help.\*
- 25 Did I not weep for those whose day was hard?  
Was not my soul grieved for the poor?
- 26 But when I looked for good, evil came;  
and when I waited for light, darkness came.
- 27 My inward parts are in turmoil, and are never still;  
days of affliction come to meet me.
- 28 I go about in sunless gloom;  
I stand up in the assembly and cry for help.
- 29 I am a brother of jackals,  
and a companion of ostriches.
- 30 My skin turns black and falls from me,  
and my bones burn with heat.

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Alec Basson, “Just Skin and Bones: The Longing for Wholeness of the Body in the Book of Job”, *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008) p.289.

31 My lyre is turned to mourning,  
and my pipe to the voice of those who weep.

What do you hear in the story of Job? Who is Job? Who is the adversary?  
(conversation)

I have always seen the story of Job as affirming that when someone is suffering, they don't have to pretend everything is okay when it is not, and we can name, or even yell, our feelings about suffering. Job shows that the universe can hold our anger and despair. Considering the work of *catharsis*, perhaps another lens to look at this story is that, for better or worse, we are connected through human history, in part, through suffering. As our Buddhist cousins name as the first of the Four Noble Truths, there is suffering. There is injustice. People we love get hurt, we are hurt, and we all struggle with making meaning of our stories. Something that Job might offer us this morning is to remember that we do not often hear what others are shouting to heavens. We do not know most people's story, we do not know how they understand their experience in relationship to meaning making. How might we hear our neighbor screaming into the whirlwind? How might we remember that each of us struggles with grief, loss, and making meaning in the midst of suffering.

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Was not my soul grieved for the poor?  
26 But when I looked for good, evil came;  
and when I waited for light, darkness came.  
27 My inward parts are in turmoil, and are never still;  
days of affliction come to meet me.  
28 I go about in sunless gloom;  
I stand up in the assembly and cry for help.

Human beings have wrestled with making meaning for thousands of years. Does it help when we are in despair, to know that others have felt as lonely as *Philoctetes* abandoned to an island, or Job, standing and crying for help? These stories show those who are suffering, being seen. They help us remember that we are not islands, we are are not alone in the assembly. We are part of a human community stretching and struggling through time. It also helps us to practice listening for the voices of those who need to be seen and heard. So that we can be present for one another, to witness to grief for things which cannot be changed, and just as importantly to be companions moving forward toward balance. There is suffering, and some of our most ancient stories can help us find our way.

So may it be. Amen.