

Meeting with Pain

This work has arisen out of my own experience of having to live with severe, chronic pain. In order to survive with any sense of myself intact, I had to learn how to 'work' with the pain; how to 'be' in the pain.

Although each individual's experience will be different, I hope to offer to people in pain – where it is appropriate – some of the lessons that I found helpful, but perhaps more importantly, the chance to work out for themselves, how 'to be' with their pain, and the opportunity to learn those lessons and truths from their situation, that are for them.

The work is not about reducing pain levels – i.e. it is not pain management in the traditional sense, as the term is used by the medical profession. Rather it is about learning to live abundantly, even if pain is a central feature of life.

The work is aimed at those people who suffer from chronic pain, who realise, or are beginning to realise, that analgesia or whatever form of therapy they find helpful, is not going to solve all their problems; that there is more to living with pain than the purely physical aspects, and that they need to find a way of living creatively out of their predicament.

Thus this work is for those individuals who have reached the point of no longer continually searching for the next treatment or possible cure, or who are open to the possibility that such a place exists.

Living in constant pain raises all sorts of questions about myself, my relationships, my roles in life and so on. It very often brings me to question my self-worth. It also brings me face to face with the very deepest of life's questions, asking that I begin to make some sense of my suffering.

During their journey, I hope that people may find some sort of accommodation to their pain, where they are not the pain, but neither are they in denial of it.

In this way, although I cannot perhaps reduce pain, I can enable individuals to maintain their self-worth and to find that some growth and personal development are possible, giving them renewed vision of what is likely to have become a very 'narrow' existence.

One of the ideas that I work with is that of 'meeting the pain'. I think that most of us who are in chronic pain, spend our lives running from it. The challenge that Speedwell offers is different and is about ceasing to run, turning around and facing the pain and distress. Only by doing this, can I enter the distress and then find the possibility of moving through it. By running all the time, I invest the pain with tremendous power and soon learn to fear both it and the consequences it has for me.

Meeting the pain requires that I establish some sort of relationship with it. I need to get to know my pain, and I can only do so by spending time with it. Most of us have been taught one way or another, that distraction is a coping mechanism; something to stop me from thinking about pain, something to stop it from entering my awareness. This may well be a good idea if the pain is short lived, but I can not distract myself continually for the rest of my life. Once again, I am trying to run, which can become exhausting and begins to dictate how I respond and behave.

Spending time with my pain, speaking with it, asking questions of it, giving it the right to reply and above all, listening to it enables me to learn who my pain is and how it is, and to learn what is happening to me.

I may find this difficult, and frightening at first, because I worry that if I let the pain have some attention, it may take over and seem even worse and I may somehow get lost within it.

However, it does seem that if this pain has to be here, then the more I can let it enter into my time, the more I can learn of it. And in meeting the pain, I inevitably meet myself, and learn more of who I am and who I might become.

Most of us think of pain as 'unacceptable'. This label must be dropped. If I am in chronic pain, facing the rest of my life in this predicament, I can not afford to regard pain like this, as it prevents me from being able to look at it in a creative rather than destructive way.

I also need a place where I can be 'other' than how the pain has taught me to be. For example, if I have always taken up a stance of 'being brave' with my pain, a safe environment where I might learn what it is like not to be brave, and to learn something of how appropriate that might or might not be, can be invaluable.

There are different aspects to suffering pain, and in meeting the pain, I will find myself dealing with each of these at different times. The physical effect of pain is the most obvious and at times it may prevent me from being able to focus on other parts of life. However dealing with the purely physical, at the cost of spending time with the other aspects, may in the end not be an effective way of dealing with my suffering.

The other components of suffering are emotional, mental and spiritual and each must be dealt with when appropriate.

Learning how I am, what it is that I am feeling and being able to express those feelings may be part of the work. Mental anguish of guilt, fear and shame may haunt me when I am in continual pain and it may be necessary to recognise these for what they are and to place them in a realistic perspective.

Unable to understand what is happening to me, I will need to search for meaning, to make sense of the pain, to place it within my understanding of the world and the beliefs that I hold.

Working with pain can not be done in isolation, since other issues in life will make dealing with the pain more difficult, and the pain will make dealing with other issues more difficult.

Meeting the pain and getting to know it better, mean that the pain will enter my consciousness more. This is vitally important, because unless I am aware of how I am at any given moment, I can not make realistic decisions about how much I can do and instead tend to make 'blanket decisions' which may either stop me from doing something when I am able, or drive me into doing something, when for both my sake and the sake of those around me, it would be better if I did not do it.

Once I have made a realistic decision for myself about what I should be doing, I have the possibility of standing firm in that decision, rather than feeling compelled to meet the demands of others.

This of course requires that I develop a basic honesty with myself and those around me, as to how I really am.

Learning this sort of self-awareness enables me to journey with the pain, rather than fighting against it all the time. An attitude of fighting against the pain only serves to use up the precious energy that I have, and increases my level of tension and anxiety, which in turn may raise my level of perception of the pain.

Awareness perhaps more importantly also involves learning about how I am in the middle of all that is going on for me; learning how I respond to situations and how I might be different in my response. In this way I learn to journey with myself as well as with the pain. Developing awareness is also important in learning how other people react to the constant presence of my pain, and how I, in turn, cope with their reactions.

When someone makes an enquiry about my pain, it is sometimes very difficult to know how to reply, perhaps especially to those who are closest to me.

Pain can isolate me very easily, and the reactions of others can add to this. Learning how I too can isolate myself, is important.

With time, it may seem that folk question the fact that I am in pain, and they very definitely 'walk on the other side' – gently and with concern, but at some distance from me, for mostly, I and they, do not know how to cope with the presence of continual pain. It faces us all with our own humanity and raises too many uncomfortable questions.

I feel awkward and possibly guilty too, because I can not do the one thing that everyone wants me to i.e. to get better.

So I have to discover a place within me where I can learn how to be honest about the presence of my pain and the impact that it has on me, and yet, not lay this on the other person as a burden that they have to carry.

Acceptance is one of those words which I very often use without really understanding what I mean by it. Each of us who set out on our journey with pain, we will have to discover the meaning for ourselves.

For me, it has something to do with a change in my attitude from regarding my pain as a situation to be conquered, to living out of that situation from moment to moment.

Acceptance is a journey in itself – not something that happens at a particular point in time. I exist in relationship to the pain, and my understanding of pain will be changed by my increasing awareness of it. Coming to a place of acceptance of myself, my limitations and the things I can not change, is not about passivity or defeat. Neither is it tolerance. It requires a good deal of effort and energy to live out of the situation moment by moment, and although I will probably never ‘like’ what is happening to me, I can find some accommodation to it, which allows me to live whatever I make of the rest of my life with some meaning.

Acceptance means living in the full light of what is happening to me and again, not fighting what has to be. It means being open to the possibilities and opportunities that still surround me, even if they are not the ones I would have chosen for myself.

In coming to a place of acceptance, I need to surrender that which I thought I was, and instead, work with the truth of the situation.

However, any degree of acceptance that I find, is only for now. Tomorrow I will have to move on again in my understanding.

In ‘working with the pain’ in this way, I will embark on a journey of discovery about myself too. Chronic pain tends to gradually strip me of those things in life that I once took for granted and thought to be essential : my job, my role, my gifts and abilities, my self-esteem and self-value, my credibility in the sight of others and so on. Not having these to build my life around, I will discover, if I am prepared to look, more of who I actually am; what there really is inside of me.

Thus, I will inevitably start to wonder how it is that my life is as it is. Having learned something of what my experience of pain is, I will start to reflect on that experience, to learn from it of how I might be different and of how my pain fits into the world as I know it.

This is a journey which touches the things of the soul and might be termed spiritual. I only hesitate to use that word, since I think it is much over-used and misunderstood. It will however, be a journey that will grow from my own experience and world view. ‘Religion’ is not a requirement of the work, and the work may not be expressed in overtly spiritual terms. It does require however, an admission that these things are important and have their place.

As the helper, I can not assume that I know the way forward for anyone, nor what it is that anybody may need to learn. Rather I must provide a safe space, where the individual in pain can work out what they need to learn for themselves from the situation that they find themselves in. Having met more of themselves with their pain, hopefully they can be enabled to move on to what they might become in the future.

As the helper, if I am to be of any real help, I must not only be willing to walk with those in pain, but I too must be willing to learn for myself through the walking. Together, I trust and believe, we will find out what it is that we need to do, in order that the individual can live creatively with pain.

Individuals and their pain can not be neatly fitted into one way of thinking, and so how the work is actually done will vary in response to individual clients’ needs. The techniques and theories and models may give the helper confidence, but in the end, these are not what the therapeutic relationship is built upon, and the relationship established with each individual is the basis for the work.

I believe that we all carry within us the potential for growth and wholeness and that given the right environment, we will develop into our truest selves – that which we were meant to be. The environment for growth and wholeness that I try to create depends upon that relationship which is built upon a mutuality of love and trust. It is marked by genuine concern and interest, and above all, acceptance and the infinite value placed upon the other

person.

Within the working relationship, I see myself as holding a space for the other person. A space where they can be just who they are or who they need to be; a space in which they can become themselves. In that space, I enable them to set out around themselves the events or circumstances of their lives, in a sort of panoramic view, so that they can see more clearly the place through which they are moving. This provides the opportunity to explore where they have come from and how come they are as they are, and also the opportunity to make choices for the future.

For myself, it is important not to work from any specific role e.g. doctor, religious, counsellor, as this may provide a façade for me to hide behind and may limit what I perceive that I may be able to offer to another. Rather I need to work from my own self, valuing and utilising my own experience. This seems to be the most fruitful and genuine way that I can go on offering myself in relationship, and working out just what that may mean.

We can not get rid of chronic pain. But we can be alongside someone, offering ourselves and journeying with them as they learn to accept and live with their pain.

My own journey with pain and suffering has taken me, as it must anybody, to a vastly different understanding of the world, creation and my part in it; to a different relationship with the Divine. For me personally, the work is about bearing the true image of what I have seen in the world, as we enable others to make their own journey of discovery.

The only path ahead for each of us in pain, is the one we create by walking on it. Perhaps in the end, it is the journey that is of importance rather than any imagined destination.

Sr Rachel