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Author(s): Allan S. Berger

Source: *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Fall, 2003), pp. 251-255

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27511691>

Accessed: 29/07/2010 06:07

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Choosing to Suffer: Reflections on an Enigma

ALLAN S. BERGER, M.D.

ABSTRACT: Most people pursue pleasure and seek to avoid pain. Some individuals, however, choose a life characterized by pain and suffering. The author describes the most common varieties of such behavior patterns: *asceticism*, *martyrdom*, *penance* and *masochism*. Critical psychodynamics are discussed and the author proposes a synthesis of the motivation underlying pain/suffering seeking behavior.

KEY WORDS: suffering; asceticism; martyrdom; penance; masochism.

“Life admits not of delays;
when pleasure can be had,
it is fit to catch it.”

—Samuel Johnson, 1777¹

People generally pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Yet there are some who choose pain and suffering, using this term broadly to include not only physical injury but also humiliation, abnegation of corporeal pleasure, and sometimes death. This paper describes the most common forms of suffering-oriented behavior—*asceticism*, *political/social martyrdom*, *personal martyrdom*, *penance* and *psychic masochism*. I will also reflect on the underlying dynamics and propose a synthesis of the varied pain-oriented behavior patterns.

Asceticism is characterized by the abnegation of corporeal pleasures. The life of poverty, obedience, and chastity of the Roman Catholic monk or nun is illustrative of such behavior. Foregoing verbal communication may also be included in this spartan existence.

The latter portion of Mahatma Gandhi's life, with the consumption of meager fare; multiple bouts of starvation; and minimal body covering is also illustrative. Mother Teresa's life of service to the poor, ill, and dying of India is a more current example of a similar pursuit.

Allan S. Berger, M.D. is Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine in Washington, D.C.

Address reprint requests to Allan S. Berger, M.D. 1302 Midwood Place, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910.

The goal of the ascetic is to more richly experience spirituality and holiness.

Martyrdom may be either political/social or personal.

Political/Social Martyrdom involves choosing to suffer or even die in the pursuit of a social purpose or goal deemed to be more important than life itself. Rather than choosing humiliation, as does the psychic masochist, the political/social martyr often chooses death rather than endure humiliation. I shall cite a few recent historical examples:

Mahatma Gandhi² fasted and threatened to starve himself to death to attract attention to his quest for Indian independence from Great Britain. He led his followers to lie down in front of oncoming British tanks in the presence of the world's photographers and reporters, as a protest against British occupation. It was a unique nonviolent plea for political freedom. World pressure, consequent to the actions of Gandhi and his followers, resulted in Britain's relinquishing the Crown Jewel of the Empire, with India becoming independent in 1947.

During the Vietnam conflict, which involved heavy bombing with grave loss of life and property, the Buddhist clergy protested American action. A number of monks drenched themselves in gasoline and set themselves alight in front of the American Embassy in Saigon as a protest against the American military. In essence, the monks were saying: "Even as I am consumed by fire, so is my country and its people destroyed by your bombing . . . take pity and withdraw your forces." Although this self immolation contributed to intense U.S. domestic disension about the war, the goal of these monks was not attained.

Yet another instance of self-chosen sacrifice in the service of a noble cause is illustrated by the behavior of Reverend Martin Luther King³ and his followers. Reverend King chose to nonviolently protest the treatment of Blacks in the United States. This involved allowing himself and his "brothers" to be struck with electrically charged cattle prods, attacked by vicious police dogs, endure beatings and serve time in jail. As in the case of Mahatma Gandhi, all of this was filmed and reported upon by the world press and photographers." As we know, this martyrdom was successful and led to many laudable societal changes. Although martyrdom may embrace total nonviolence, it is, nonetheless, a dangerous business. Both Gandhi and Reverend King were assassinated.

We admire these martyrs because of the moral nobility inherent in their choice to eschew violence. By way of contrast, although we may be sympathetic to the goals of Chechen or Palestinian terrorists seeking a homeland, we cannot esteem *their* martyrdom because they are indiscriminately violent.⁴

A favorable outcome to political/social martyrdom is dependent upon arousing the conscience of the oppressor and that of the informed world. Such an appeal can only be successful where the conscience of the powerful is accessible. For example, martyrdom was of no avail in the Warsaw Ghetto extermination of the Jews because the conscience of the world was comatose.

Personal Martyrdom is more familiar to us. It differs from political martyr-

dom only in that the treasured goal is of a more psychological or personal nature. But, sometimes the difference is blurred. Examples abound:

- The crucifixion of Jesus to atone for our sins;
- The martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul who gave their lives rather than desert their flock;
- Rabbi Akiba burning at the stake rather than renouncing his God;
- The martyrdom of the Jews of Masada who killed themselves rather than fall into the hands of the Romans;
- Czerniakow,⁵ the elder of the Warsaw Council, who suicided rather than comply with Nazi demands to deliver Jews for transport to extermination camps;
- Dr. Janusz Korczak,⁶ headmaster of a Warsaw orphanage who turned down an offer by the Nazis to go free, choosing rather to accompany his charges to the gas chamber.

Penance involves enduring pain/suffering/discomfort as penitence for having sinned and in an effort to attain forgiveness. Penance is well exemplified by the Greek myth of Heracles, or as he is better known, Hercules.⁷

Heracles is the ultimate Superman and hero. He was born of a goddess and a human father. He was endowed with remarkable strength, even from infancy. For various reasons not germane to this discussion, Hera had a great dislike for Heracles and sought to harm him. Heracles was married to Megara and had several children with her. Hera sent Madness to overcome Heracles, and in a fit of rage he killed his wife and all of his children. He soon suffered a guilty conscience and consulted Pythia, the Delphic oracle, who offered him the opportunity to expiate his sins by serving his cousin, King Eurystheus. To put it in modern parlance, the king requested that Heracles perform twelve very difficult acts of "community service," in return for which he would be forgiven his errant behavior and granted immortality and access to Olympus. His labors were not easy and included slaying fearsome monsters, capturing a vicious dog (Cerberus), and slaying an evil innkeeper (Procrustes) whose custom it was to torture his guests. The penance was willingly undertaken and resulted in a very positive outcome.

Psychic Masochism

We will not focus upon *sexual masochism*, which is the experiencing of sexual gratification as a consequence of enduring pain, humiliation or degradation. We will only discuss *psychic masochism*, which is the inclination to experience pleasure in pain, discomfort, suffering and self-denial.

The masochistic individual unconsciously, that is to say, without awareness, arranges his or her life so as to ever be the victim. A common example of this is the woman who repeatedly marries a series of men who physically

and psychologically abuse her. Such people are at a loss to explain their repetitive self defeating behavior and may comment, "bad things just seem to happen to me." Masochistic behavior has its roots in childhood. Masochism is an unconscious *protest* of the helpless against the perceived oppressor; and—in the deepest unconscious—it is also a *plea* for reconciliation and succor. The paradigm for this behavior is expressed in the following fantasy of the wronged child. The youngster feels mistreated by mother which is usually the result of actual repeated gross injustices. The child thinks, "I'll run away into the snowy cold forest—hungry, barefoot and only wearing my pj's. I'll be lost and frozen. Mother won't be able to find me. She'll be very, very upset and sad. That will teach her a lesson. I'll be almost dead when Mother finally finds me. She'll see my blue, icy body and she'll feel sorry for what she did. Her cold heart will be warmed and she'll take me home and give me milk and cookies."

Proposed synthesis of the varieties of suffering/pain-seeking behavior

The various patterns of behavior we have discussed—*asceticism, political/social martyrdom, personal martyrdom, penance and psychic masochism*—all have something in common. The behavior has a purpose or goal whose value/meaning is transcendent.

The *ascetic* seeks purification and holiness with the comfort of feeling closer to God. The *political/social martyr* strives for a treasured social purpose, accepting death if need be as the price that must be paid. The striving may be for the freedom and autonomy of India (Gandhi) or racial equity under law (Rev. King), etc. The *personal martyr* also sacrifices for a higher value such as atoning for the sins of man (Jesus) or endeavoring to comfort helpless orphans faced with extermination (Korczak). The *penitent* seeks forgiveness and reconciliation.

The *psychic masochist* unconsciously yearns for reunion—"when you see how I have suffered, you'll take pity and love/nurture me at last." This pined for reconciliation is originally directed to mother. But, as Baudelaire said, "Mother is the word for God in the eyes and hearts of little children."⁸

People choose very different manners of suffering and do so for very different reasons. Conventional religious beliefs are frequently absent. What these people share in common is the commitment to the realization of *their* highest values. Perhaps it might not be too much of a stretch to opine that these people seek to secure *their* heaven and walk with *their* god.

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