

Asking Why

Chronic pain is a mysterious and frustrating experience. It can be debilitating and isolating for the sufferer whose symptoms are not understood by them or their loved ones. That medical doctors are often dumbfounded by the cause or treatment only compounds the issue.

One day this summer during routine rounds, I visited with one such chronic pain sufferer. Upon entering his dimly lit room, I noticed the air felt stale and his morale low. His wife sat at his bedside with a tired expression on her face. As I approached the patient, the frail man with salt and pepper hair solemnly implored, "All I want to know is *why*?"

"*Why*, what?" I replied gently.

"Why have I been in pain for so long? No one knows what's wrong with me. One rabbi told me it's because God tests us, challenges us to make us stronger."

I admitted to him that I used to hold a similar belief that everything happens for a reason, and then recalled a lecture on theodicy I'd attended just the day before. "What you're describing is theodicy, which assumes God's justice. In other words, it's a system of reward and punishment. Recently, I heard someone explain why, this way..." I paused for a moment and continued, "God created the world out of chaos. Therefore, the world is imperfect. And as God's creations, we too are imperfect."

"That is a good answer, he affirmed, "I guess that makes sense. I still have a hard time grasping this and all the bad things that are happening in my life."

"You are number one," I said, "Healing comes from the inside out. Send positive affirmations to your pain and open your heart to your circumstance. Focus on healing. Thinking of all the other hardships that are going on in the midst of your illness is counterintuitive to the healing process."

"I guess I over analyze things too much. I over think things," he said.

"It's human nature to try to figure out what's going on with us, but sometimes things just are, and we need to find acceptance. I wish you a *refuah shleima*, a full healing of mind, body, and spirit."

"It's mental," he burst out, "It's as much mental as physical."

Pensive, but fatigued, he thanked me for stopping by and said he appreciated the visit.

As it was Friday, I offered him and his wife Shabbat candles; they obliged. I left.

For years his incessant worry waged war with the healing process. His frustration was met by inklings of defeat. Nonetheless, on a spiritual level, he quested to know why. Our brief conversation allowed him to think differently about his pain. He realized that in order to manage it, he had to accept it.

Shabbat gave him the space and time to reflect. The following week I learned he'd left a couple messages on the Chaplaincy Department answering machine: "...The Shabbat candles...they do work," he said, "I wanted to tell LuAnne that when they say miracles don't happen, well they do. I've been in serious pain for five years, and today I woke up without any pain whatsoever...so the candles work, miracles work, even medicine works, so I just want to thank her."

This visit was transformative for him and for me. Even if it was only for a moment, he woke pain free for the very first time in years. This "miracle" came from within him. And from him, I learned the power of presence and compassion in pastoral care. The question of *why* will surely rise again. When it does, I have this encounter to reference as a source of strength and guidance.