

Editorial:

“Protecting” the Sufferer

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Dr. Jon Amundson’s paper entitled *The Special Obligation of the Sufferer* that launches our 2019 issue of the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* is an important and provocative hermeneutic endeavor to understand our relationship with suffering and with those who suffer. In his creative, interpretive, and insightful way, Amundson invites us all to think about suffering differently and also consider those behaviors in which we embark, in “good faith,” to try to support the sufferer. He challenges those often superficial and distanced efforts to offer support, as well as those over-indulgent, and overly “helpful” attempts, invoking deep reflection on our responses and our efforts to “do the right thing.” Then Amundson takes a step further, a step that at first startled me, putting the obligation on the sufferer to find ways to make others know how to respond. It reminds me, however, of one of the most important learnings that I have had over the past year.

I have a dear friend who has been in my life for 43 years, much more than half of my life. A few years ago, she was diagnosed with a life-shortening neuromuscular degenerative disease. Although her progress through the disease has been slower than some, it *is* progressive and it has insistently, against her will, taken away important and meaningful aspects of her life.

I love this friend and I wanted, more than anything, to be here for her (and to be honest, for me, as well) during these years but I ended up, in spite of my intentions, hurting her and, in return, learning one of the most significant lessons I have learned about suffering.

I had been experiencing a rough couple of years with parental caregiving and then the deaths of both of my parents over a span of only 15 months. During this time, my friend would occasionally text me, trying to connect. I would respond in cursory ways, briefly, with no details of my life – responses that not only did not invite engagement but in fact discouraged it. My rationale at the time was: I cannot talk to her; I cannot tell her what my life is really like right now because my suffering is *nothing* compared to what she is undergoing. In my mind, it would have been selfish and self-centered to burden her further with my affairs when she was dealing with enough in her life. I was “protecting” her.

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Eventually, my friend called me on my apparent lack of interest in connecting, in staying engaged. I told her exactly how I felt about not believing I had the right to complain and burden her with my life because, in comparison to hers, my concerns seemed minimal (older parents die, that is expected; I should just deal with it). My friend was hurt, and angry, and responded to me in a way that has changed me forever. She texted: “So, this fucking disease has robbed me of so many things and now you’re saying it’s robbing me of the chance to be a friend?”

In the privilege of friendship, perhaps what is more important than having a friend is being one. I had forgotten this and forgotten that someone can be suffering immensely but still want and need to hold on to those things in life that hold meaning and that make them who they are. She has always been a friend to me in some of my hardest times and some of my happiest but here I was taking that right from her, removing what lies at the heart of friendship: being able to be one.

As Amundson wrote, we often do not know how to respond to suffering and in particular to the sufferer and we resort to platitudes akin to “let me know if you need anything; if there is anything I can do...” but we also resort to mechanisms of misguided protection. In doing so, without open conversation, we make huge assumptions about who needs to be protected from what. Gadamer’s notion of genuine conversation (1960/1989) is absent and, like the famous Gadamer and Derrida dialogue, we enter into a behavior based on a “conversation that never happened” (Bernstein, 2008). Intentions cannot be read or assumed; only actions are obvious. I might have said to her something as direct as “there is a lot going on in my life right now. Are you up to hearing about it?”

Hermeneutics asks this of us, demands it. It asks that we move beyond what we assume, unquestion, take for granted, and believe to be true - - into being prepared to be taught, to listen, to overturn things, and understand that we all have obligations in suffering.

References

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