

Pandemic Series Part 3 Pain
Soul Wounds and Moral Injury ©

By Dr. Lois A. Dodds

Developmental Psychologist
and Trauma Therapist

Specialist in Global Humanitarian Workers

Co-founder and Director

Heartstream Resources for Global Workers

www.heartstreamresources.org

101 Herman Lee Circle, Liverpool, PA 17045

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We're wrestling! We're reeling! We're wracked with pain in this pandemic! What is happening? Has the world spun off its axis? It is agonizing to know: WE DO THE BEST WE CAN BUT IT IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH! So, we ask the deeper questions, "Is God enough?" "Is love enough?" "Am I enough?"

Those of us on the "front lines" are confronted hourly by these tormenting questions. How do we find the answers? Is nature out of control? In Eden Adam and Eve were told to manage the earth and to make it fruitful. Now we know that mankind has failed in that long-ago mandate. We have only to read the daily news to know of the horrible disruptions to God's order and beauty. I can prove it with the photos of miners ravaging the magnificent cathedral-like rain forest near where we used to live, robbing the earth of beauty and dignity for mere gold.

As the poet Dylan Thomas wrote, on the death of his father, we "...rage, rage against the dying of the light."¹ We don't want to let go of life. We don't want those whom we love "...to go ...into that dark night." Life is precious and we cling to it for ourselves and for others.

Because we are God's children, made in His image to create and sustain life, it hurts when we cannot do that, when we see it slip away. It hurts when we know people are dying alone, with no arms of love to enfold them. It wounds our souls, our spirits, to know that no amount of love and care or medical intervention can pull everyone back from the brink. It is tormenting to see children die of systems failure or villagers with no food, let alone a respirator.

At such a time it is tempting to wonder if God cares. The eternal question of the unbeliever, "How could a loving God let this happen?" comes even to the faithful. God knows. Does He care? If He cares, why does He let it happen?

Fortunately, our record of God's knowing and caring is a long one. He raised up a people for Himself, out of His love and His desire to be in intimate relationship with mankind.² "In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them, and he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." (Isaiah 63:9, NIV) Over and over, in their sufferings and failures, "He sent His word and healed them," (Psalm 107:20)

I take great comfort in this long history of God's caring. We often quote Jeremiah 29:11, that God cares and has a plan. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future." I always contemplate this promise in light of the reality the people of God were facing. They had been taken into captivity by Babylon. Imagine, the death marches, many never making it to that far-away land where they were to be enslaved. Sadly, their captivity was, in fact, because they had so often turned away from the true God, to false gods. Now their 70 years of captivity had begun. But God was there.

¹ Poem by Dylan Thomas. www.poets.org

² Apostle Paul argued this eloquently before the Athenians at Aerogapus. See Acts. 17:22-31.

What I love is that God did not say to them, “Now, you miserable people! Sit here and cry for 70 years! I want you to be wretched and miserable! Sit in a hovel and eat dirt! You are being punished—don’t forget that!” No, he told them something so entirely different. His lifesaving, life-giving instructions to them so long ago can help us now. Though we are not in for a 70-year pandemic, we can heed the caring and creative words to find balance in the midst of uncertainty and myriad losses.

God told his people to plant gardens, to build houses, to let their children marry, and for them to pray for the prosperity of their captors—in other words, to live normal daily lives while in the midst of their captivity. (See Jeremiah 29:4-7). If others benefited, they too would benefit. Isn’t this a theme we are telling each other every day now? “You are not alone. We are all in this together.” Taking care of each other is a powerful statement of the ways we value life.

Such commitment to daily healthy living enables us to find balance. It is true that the people were sad; they hung their harps on the willows and found it hard to sing. (Psalm 137:1-3) But for them, as for us, good food and a home, music, children at play, and thriving neighbors brought normalcy to life in frightening times.

Soul Wounds—Ripping the Fabric of Our Being

A wound is a tear, a gap, a gouge, a ripping of vital tissues. It bleeds and lets our vital life flow escape, even fade out. The soul is perhaps more readily wounded than the flesh.

Our soul wounds occur because we care--and **there is no fairness**, no equality in the virus which attacks so many. We feel the deep pain, the profound hurts of those we know and love—loss of life, of father or mother or child, of job and business, of dignity, and of everyday necessities. Rather than dulling our own sense of suffering to give us ease, God shows us how to have his heart and to mitigate the suffering of others.

We are wounded because **resources are so unequal**—we live in a warped and weary world! I suffer a wound that Shipibos in our old neighborhood scramble to find some intervention for their loved ones dying.³

³ Michael Dodds, excerpt from Facebook, May 19, 2020

As most people who know me know, I grew up in the Peruvian Amazon, where my parents served as medical missionaries. The very same Amazonian communities among which I grew up are now being severely ravaged by COVID-19, as you can read for yourself in this letter from Dr. Miguel Hilario Escobar, a member of the Shipibo-Konibo indigenous nation who went on to study at Oxford and earn his Ph.D. from Stanford, and now teaches at the Universidad Nacional Intercultural de la Amazonía (UNIA), located in the very place I grew up. If you are interested in giving financially to help in their medical relief, see below. I spend a lot of my emotional energy on the apex of Maslow's hierarchy of needs--self-actualization--but for the many Shipibo and other indigenous communities who are struggling with COVID-19 and had hardly any medical infrastructure to begin with, their urgent need is the most basic of all: air.

I read this week in *Time* magazine⁴ of groups we knew and loved, and lived among, who in three generations have moved from monolingual extended families with no written language to university educated professionals. Nurse Vanda Ortega Witoto takes care of a tribal elder who is swaying in a hand-woven hammock like the ones we cherish still, folded for safe keeping among our treasures. It speaks of the Witoto and Kokama peoples, among whom we travelled by canoe to take the gift of God's words written in their own languages.

I suffer now for Filipino villages, who though tended by a loving physician and life-giving midwife nevertheless have no other recourse to resources. Their love money buys rice and milk— something to sustain the living of the village as they bury their dead.

Why do we care? Suffering soul wounds, we must ask: Would it not be easier to shut off our empathy, to look the other way? To assume that we will be okay if we overlook the pain of others? How can some people go their merry way and I am left to carry the sorrow? Why me?

As a young woman this question tormented me, especially in our early years in the Amazon before I found the balance of how to care and help without being overwhelmed with the suffering of others. I found wonderful help and solace in David Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression, Its Causes and Cure*.⁵ He asserts for us that we carry this painful capacity for suffering because we are made in the image of the caring God. I needed to know that. I needed someone older and wiser to say that my caring was right, not a defect in my sensitive soul. Rather than asking God to dull my pain, I learned to ask Him how to carry His.

Moral Injury—Shattering our Foundation

In addition to soul wounds our pain comes from moral injury. The U.S. military began to recognize this as a significant reason for the distress and even suicides of troops coming home from war. Rather than the complex of “post-trauma” symptoms, something much deeper was robbing the life of those who went to war.

Moral injury is what we experience when we either behave in ways contrary to our deeply held moral values or witness others doing so. We may be pushed to save our life by taking the life of someone else, or see others being treated in horrifying ways. These shocking and stultifying actions strike at the roots of our souls, violating our consciences. We act as brutes and behave in repugnant and alarming ways. This injures the soul, shatters one's moral foundation.

In our context as humanitarian servants, out to care for the world on God's behalf, we are up against systems and situations which undercut our motivations and dearly gained knowledge and

⁴ “Generation Pandemic.” *Time*, 2020. June 1, June 8. P.71.

⁵ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. (1965) *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*. Publ; Eerdmans.

expertise. We might scream, “I know how to save lives! I took an oath to do so! Now I am locked into a system that won’t let me do it! It conspires against good!” A recent example told to me by a highly trained obstetrician is when she can save a mother and baby with an emergency C-section, but the culture prohibits it. If she does it without permission, she will be thrown out of the country and loses the chance to care for more mothers and babies in distress.

We cry out, “What’s wrong with these values? They are not God’s or even human. How have (these) people descended into this abyss of denial, of destructive self-interest? I am here to do good, but I am trapped... How can I collaborate with a defective or corrupt system? At such times, I must remember that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers....” (Ephesians 6:12)

We may also lament that folks back home (or “out there”) do not understand our pain and the complexity of our dilemmas. We might weep in the face of calamity, “I have given my all—and what have I got to show for it? Is it worth it all? Does God care?

What are We to Do? Is Healing Possible?

Is there healing? Can we ever find balance? My poem as a young woman with my husband Larry in Viet Nam.

Balance 1⁶

*What good is all my private joy
when the world around me, broken,
struggles in grief and despair?*

*What kind of surgery shall I employ
to shield my heart,
protect my ear,
prevent my spilling tear?*

*Shall I harden my heart
and close my ear,
and blind my eye?*

⁶ Lois Dodds. 1975. *We Have This Treasure*. The Cory Press

*No! As my life in you, Lord,
gives me joy,
and you furnish me
with love,
let them yield in me
compassion, insight,
wisdom, strength.*

*Lord, let me prize my private joy
and let it nurture me
that I may show your love,
reveal your planned redemption,
help the world break free.*

I face the same struggles now, with different world circumstances. How can I stay sane, healthy, energetic in order to give to other while I am wracked with the pains of this pandemic?

Back to Our Foundations

Remember the captivity? Seventy years in Babylon? One of those who “prospered” spiritually and in esteem during that calamity was the prophet Daniel. When he was brought before the king demanding he reveal the meaning of the king’s dream, Daniel so wisely said that no man could do it. But, he reminded the king, “...**there is a God in heaven** who reveals mysteries.” (Daniel 2:28)

1. **Know God’s heart.** It is always full of compassion, abounding in love. (Exodus 43:7)
There is still a God in heaven! He has not absented His throne!
2. **Use His promises** “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises...” (II Peter. 1:3, 4a, NIV) This is one of the most practical promises! Each day I ask myself, and the Lord,
 - a. What do I need today for *life*? In all my distress? To live well?

b. What do I need today for *godliness*—that is, to reflect God’s character? To show His love in this pandemic?

3. **Know His plan**—Though there is calamity, this is not the end. Psalm 88 draws us into the agony of soul of one sufferer and ascertains that reality. Psalm after Psalm, prophet after prophet, assert the good ending. We know that even all creation “stands on tip-toe,” watching to see how God will reconcile all nature and all mankind. (Romans 8:18-22)

4. **Grieve and grieve with**...Tell God how you feel. Tell Him your private struggle to keep joy in the midst of widespread trouble, distress, suffering. Grief is healthy; grieving with others helps you both.

5. **Draw His mantle of love around you.** Daily renewal in God’s Word and prayer for yourself and others gives life and strength so you can keep on giving. Soak up the love and care you receive from others. Wrap it ‘round you like a robe to ward off the chill of pain. Draw around you the love of family, friends, the Lord himself. Like a sacred mantle these enfold us and shield us from the devastating emotions which could consume us

6. **Resolve to use your resources.** The Psalmist asks, “What shall I render to the Lord for all His goodness to me?” or, “How shall I repay the Lord...” (Psalm 116:12) My physician husband and I learned long ago that the more we participated in the solutions to pain, the more we became involved as agents of help and care, the less helpless we felt in the face of trouble. We discovered that the more we apply ourselves to solutions the less helpless we feel. This is an important principal now. If we only look on from afar, our sense of helplessness compounds. When we become part of the solution, we gain a sense of competence in caring. So, ask the Lord how you can put your resources of time, energy, material goods or money to work. Resolve! Do it! Be a voice and be a force. Join with others in the battle.