Dear People Whom God Loves,

**WHY SUFFERING?**

I suppose that we won’t fully know the answer in this life. I have a partial insight that is helpful to me. Perhaps it will be helpful to you. I want to hold together the knowledge that suffering is real and the belief that we are infinitely loved.

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We start when there was no universe and there was no time. We don’t have words adequate to express this. These words are trying to express what existed before time. The phrase *before time* is inadequate because the words before and after presume that time is present.

I mention this to help us realize that we are dealing with mystery. When we are speaking about mystery the best we can do is get a pointer to the mystery. The best we can hope for is an inkling of what the mystery is - I would like more, but an inkling is enough. Faith (trust) holding on does the rest…

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LOVE (GOD) exists. There is nothing else. LOVE (GOD) is not a being. LOVE (GOD) is spirit. There is nothing material. Some use the phrase loving energy to refer to LOVE (GOD). I don’t see that as an adequate expression. There is physicality to energy. So subtle that the way LOVE (GOD) works is vastly different than the way we creatures do things. Our reason cannot explain it. Reason can only go so far. We all have to make a leap of faith. Some of us will choose to believe that there is something more. Some of us will choose to believe that there is nothing more.

Another way of putting it is: Is there ultimate meaning or is there not? Is love ultimate or is it not? I choose to believe that love and meaning are ultimate.

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LOVE (GOD) gives birth to the universe. This means that the universe is always dependent for its existence on the sustaining power of LOVE (GOD). Without that sustaining power we and the rest of the universe would not exist. We call this creation “from nothing” - a good but inadequate phrase to express the mystery. It is quite different than causing something.

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LOVE (GOD) is continually allowing us to be. This means to me that LOVE (GOD), though different from the universe, lives in the universe and is mysteriously active in the universe.

Since we humans are in the image and likeness of God that living in and acting in us is deeper than it is in the rest of the universe. The closeness between LOVE (GOD) and us humans can hardly be exaggerated as long as we recognize that we are not God).

When we speak of LOVE (GOD) as giving birth to us and everything, we call GOD, Father. Interestingly Our Father is Our Mother.

Remember that I am not confusing this with science. Science is wonderful. This is a different kind of knowing than scientific knowledge.

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Why is there suffering in humans and other sentient creatures and the violence in non sentient creation that at times inflicts pain on creatures who feel?

I believe that all creatures are imperfect. There is violence in all non-sentient creation from the moment of the “Big Bang”. The energy is beyond our comprehension. The explosion of stars is just one example of this powerful violence.

This eventually led to humans who can love and know - a magnificent evolution. Couldn’t this have been done in a better way? I don’t know the answer to that. My belief is that since Infinite Love is the source of creation, it must be the best and perhaps the only way.

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Let us look at humans. We too are creatures. We are imperfect. There is a tug of war within us. The brain stem part of our brain gives us sexual drives and aggression. We need that, they are good. At the same time these energies left to themselves and not integrated with the rest of the brain will cause terrible pain and suffering. We will then use these energies badly. Lizards have this part of the brain.

Couldn’t it have been done in a different way? I suggest that it is necessary to being human. Like all parts of being human, it needs to be drawn into wholeness.

A newer part of our brain is the limbic system. This is the seat of our emotions. This allows us to be drawn into emotional closeness with other people. It also allows us to be afraid. This is good but it also can get out of hand.

Without this part of our brain we would not really be human. Hugging another person would be like hugging a robot.

At the same time emotions can overwhelm us and lead to dangerous and/or poor decisions. For example, fear can keep us from doing things that lead to a healthy and productive life. This precious emotional capacity also needs to be drawn into wholeness.

Dogs and cats have this part of the brain. That is why there can be mutual attachments between humans and dogs and cats that cannot take place between humans and lizards.

Couldn’t this have been done differently? I doubt it. It seems to be essential to human creatures to grow into wholeness.

The newest part of our brain is the pre-frontal cortex. This pre-frontal cortex enables us to think rationally, to plan, to see the big picture, to see various options and to sort out what is good to do and what is not. This part of the brain (which only humans have) makes us moral creatures.

The process of integrating these three parts is a slow and up and down process. We make many mistakes along the way. The process involves connecting all of the parts together - from top to bottom and bottom to top. Our human growth is the process of building in the brain more neurons and more connections among the neurons.

When we see the complexity of the process it is easier for us to understand why we cause suffering to ourselves and others.

Couldn’t it have been done differently? I doubt it. Since we humans are creatures and therefore imperfect, we need to grow toward perfection. My knowledge inclines me to see that this is reasonable. My belief that Infinite Love is behind it all, tells me that this must be the best way. Though it is hard to accept at times.

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We have reflected on how suffering is a part of being a human individual. Now let us reflect on how suffering comes from living in a community of humans.

Living in a community is valuable and I would say essential to growing as an individual. The book of Genesis reminds us that it is not good for us to be alone. The give and take and the reaction with others develops in us a way that solitude never could. Could we even think of loving if there was no one besides ourselves?

Could we possibly learn empathy and compassion if we were all alone? Without empathy and compassion would we even be living as a human being?

Living in a community is essential to our human growth. At the same time living in a community causes suffering.

We hurt each other. We form structures that are unjust. We put some people on the margins. Again I see Infinite Love working through this mess-drawing imperfect humans on the path toward perfection. This belief is harder to accept when we are in misery ourselves.

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Another step that helps me on the journey to make some sense out of suffering is my belief in the Incarnation. That is our belief that God has come into humanity in a way that is deeper and closer than (LOVE’S) (GOD’S) presence in us through creation.

Incarnation expresses our belief that LOVE (GOD) is present in and lives in Jesus who at the same time is a human being like the rest of us. This is often expressed by saying that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Remember our words point to this mystery but still leave us without fully fathoming and appreciating the mystery.

This mystery tells me that Infinite Love loves us so much that she wants to be with us in our suffering, to share our suffering, to console us in our suffering and help our suffering to be a means of drawing us into deeper compassion and mercy. Again. Drawing us imperfect humans toward perfection.

We might call this (LOVE) (GOD) mothering us much as a mother does for her child who is sick and in pain.

Our faith awareness of this can help us through difficult times. Especially at times when nothing seems to work and we are tempted to feel hopeless.

The bottom line is that we are loved and always being loved no matter what. I must confess that I write about this faith better than I live it.

This continuing and never ending presence of (LOVE)(GOD) is expressed by Jesus’ sending of the Holy Spirit.

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I want to close with our doctrine of heaven. Heaven is not a place of reward for being good. Heaven is our belief that Infinite Love is drawing us and the whole universe to the state of perfection-which is total love.

I see this summed up by the words of St. Julien of Norwich in her 14th century middle English words.

“But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that I needed, answered by this word and said: ‘Sinne is behovely [valuable/necessary], but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle manner of thing shall be wele’” (27:8-11, 209).

 Smile, God Loves You

 Father Clay