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The Fellowship of Christ’s Sufferings as Reflected in Lear and Life

Sally T. Taylor

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings.
—Philippians 3:10

As I have worked with students in creative writing over the twenty-five years of my teaching at Brigham Young University, I have often noted how the angst of young adult years is reflected in their writing. They write of their broken romances, their dysfunctional homes, their roommate agonies, their loneliness, and the stress of classroom deadlines. I understand the intensity of their feelings, just as I understand the agonies of my own children—and now grandchildren—who have suffered through false friends, lost homework, school pressure, childhood illnesses, and broken limbs. I have been there. I remember. At the other end of life’s experiences, I have observed the increase of pain and suffering as loved ones age and experience health problems and death with its devastating ripple effect on survivors. I have been there, too. I understand. Although some adversity may be self-inflicted by foolish behavior, much suffering comes regardless of anything we have done. No matter our age or situation, we will experience suffering in this life. It can be physical suffering, or it can be mental or emotional suffering—or both at once. But suffering is a necessary part of the human experience.

Gaining a Perspective

Since we cannot avoid suffering in this life, we need to gain an eternal perspective on the function and purpose of our suffering. Joseph Smith
tells us in his inspired translation that God “provided some better things for [the prophets] through their sufferings, for without sufferings they could not be made perfect” (Heb. 11:40, italics added). Thus, suffering is part of what we must do to have eternal life in the kingdom with our Father in Heaven and our elder brother, Jesus Christ. The vital question is, What are we to learn? Yes, what are we to learn by each setback, each illness, each sorrow, each tragedy that we experience?

I have had to explore that question in depth. Diagnosed with breast cancer in January 2001, I spent the year in intensive treatment, and even now I have a haystack of pills to take daily and frequent checkups with one or the other of my four doctors. The peripheral neuropathy of my hands and feet will always be with me, but the radiation damage is finally starting to ease. The cancer is in remission for now, but every unexpected ache or lump can send my heart racing with fear. The next few years are crucial, they tell me, to determine if the cancer has been eradicated.

The physical aspects of treatment are very unpleasant, but the emotional aspects can be worse. Elder Bruce C. Hafen describes this aspect of Elder Neal Maxwell’s cancer experience:

Psychic pain runs bottomlessly deep. . . . The constant threat of death keeps crashing through your barriers of mental resistance. Does such suffering somehow teach everyone who tastes it? Anne Morrow Lindbergh didn’t think so. She wrote . . . , “I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise since everyone suffers.”

I have experienced times of pain and fear, but I have also had many positive experiences that have taught me much through this difficult time. Dr. Lyman Moody said “that as soon as some [cancer] patients hear ‘the awful C-word,’ they begin to die. But others begin to live, often more fully than ever before; for life has suddenly become more precious.”

My life has indeed become more precious. As I have pondered these past two years, I have combed my experience for understanding. Foremost, I have recognized that the experience of suffering is found in abundance in scripture and most significantly with the suffering of Jesus Christ.

The Fellowship of Christ’s Suffering

Without our own individual suffering of the flesh and of the spirit, we could not join the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings to learn our greatest lesson on earth: how monumentally great, how incredibly intense was the suffering of Jesus Christ when he took upon him our pain, our grief, our afflictions, and our sins.
The Fellowship of Christ’s Sufferings as Reflected in Lear and Life

We will truly never know, never experience the intensity of Christ’s sufferings. In the Doctrine and Covenants, he tells us, “How sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not” (19:15). Yet in the midst of his suffering, Christ’s focus was on his love for mankind. Elder Maxwell tells us of Christ’s selflessness in suffering:

Jesus Christ, who by far suffered the most, has the most compassion—for all of us who suffer so much less. Moreover, He who suffered the most has no self-pity! Even as He endured the enormous suffering associated with the Atonement, He reached out to others in their much lesser suffering. Consider how, in Gethsemane, Jesus, who had just bled at every pore, nevertheless restored an assailant’s severed ear which, given Jesus’ own agony, He might not have noticed! (see Luke 22:50–51).

Consider how Jesus, while hanging so painfully on the cross, instructed the Apostle John about caring for Jesus’ mother, Mary (see John 19:26–27). Consider how in the midst of the awful arithmetic of the Atonement, Jesus nevertheless reassured one of the thieves on the cross, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). He cared, even in the midst of enormous suffering. He reached outwardly, when a lesser being would have turned inwardly.

In the afflictions we must endure in this life, we can look to Christ, knowing that he understands—truly understands because he has felt our pain. And sometimes through suffering we may share in a very small part in this fellowship to gain a deeper understanding of the Atonement and, as did Christ, use our experiences to reach out to others.

Suffering, and learning from that suffering, are also vital components of great literature. Scarcely a great novel, drama, or story is written that does not portray the physical or emotional distress of its protagonist. Scriptures help us put suffering into perspective, but great literature also can teach us how others dealt well or poorly with suffering.

For the purpose of this paper, I would like to touch on five specific lessons I have learned: empathy, obedience, patience, perspective, and love. I will show scriptural links to these lessons, explain how I personally learned these lessons, and then tie these lessons to literature.

In addition to the biblical story of Job, whose suffering is used as a touchstone for measuring anguish, one of the most painful delineations of suffering in literature is in Shakespeare’s King Lear. As I have studied and taught this play over the years, I have marveled at Shakespeare’s depth of understanding of the process and ramifications of suffering.
Lesson One: Empathy

Christ’s suffering had several purposes. As Alma puts it:

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind . . . that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

And he will take upon him death . . .; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. (Alma 7:11–12)

Alma tells us that Christ needed to gain a knowledge of what suffering meant, so he could “succor his people according to their infirmities.” In other words, Christ needed to learn empathy. His actions during his suffering demonstrate that it was a lesson well learned. We have faith that, as our intercessor with the Father, he will understand us with love and mourn with us for our sorrows. As we stand at the judgment bar, we have faith that Christ will be there as our advocate because he has felt what we have gone through; he has experienced our sufferings and understands us as no other could possibly understand us. Because of this empathy, his grace will help us be received into the presence of the Father.

After my experience with cancer, I found myself frequently on the telephone or in conversations with women who had just been diagnosed or were beginning treatment for cancer. They were afraid, as I had been, mystified by the procedures and terrified by the prospects of treatment. One dear fellow temple worker stopped me to ask about hair loss. She had been diagnosed with stage-four cancer after going for a checkup on a backache. I popped off my wig to show her the bald pate from chemotherapy, then told her of places she could find hats and described my shopping expedition—binge buying as always. I had eight new hats. I was able to make her smile. Two months later she was dead. Most of my hats were given away to the sister-in-law of another friend who was beginning chemotherapy after my hair had regrown. I lived through her fear and knew the pain and nausea ahead for her. Others called me to walk through the process with them. Each time I wanted to wrap them in my arms and cry with them. They were sisters in suffering.

King Lear has trouble with empathy because he has been waited on and pampered all of his life—cushioned from suffering. After he gives his kingdom to his daughters and begins to suffer at their hands, his first reaction is intense anger. He disowns his faithful daughter Cordelia because she makes him suffer embarrassment in front of the court by her less-than-obsequious response to his question, “Which of you shall we say doth love us the most?” (1.1.51; fig. 1).
FIG. 1. “Here I disclaim all my paternal care, / Propinquity and property of blood / And as a stranger to my heart and me / Hold thee, from this, for ever!” (1.1.113–15). King Lear angrily motions toward Cordelia, who refuses to flatter him with pretense. He denies her an inheritance because he is fooled by the feigned allegiance of his two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, who sit and watch their selfish plan unfold. Illustration by Sir John Gilbert and Ray Abel for William Shakespeare, *The Globe Illustrated Shakespeare: The Complete Works Annotated*, ed. Howard Staunton (New York: Greenwich House, 1983), 1585.
Later, confronted by both of his elder daughters and stripped of his entourage and power, his rage is intense at his daughters, the initiators of his suffering. He calls them “unnatural hags” (2.4.278), swearing revenge upon them. In mock humility, he kneels and says:

Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;
Age is unnecessary. On my knees I beg
That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food.
(2.4.154–56)

Ironically, he loses raiment, bed, and food as he goes out into the storm with his fool (fig. 2). It is not until his emotional suffering is combined with physical suffering in the cold wind and rain that he finally learns empathy. As his mind begins to turn, his moments of lucidity are filled with an understanding of suffering. He says to his shivering fool, “How dost, my boy? Art cold? . . . / Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart / That’s sorry yet for thee” (3.2.68–73). This empathy then extends to an understanding of all those who suffer. As did Christ, Lear wishes to suffer what they have, to understand their pain when he says in prayer:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your [loop’d] and window’d raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just. (3.4.28–36)
Lesson Two: Obedience

Another purpose for Christ’s suffering is given in Hebrews 5:8—“Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” (italics added).

Christ’s obedience was to a difficult divine law: expiation for mankind. It was not easy obedience because we know that during the worst of his suffering at Gethsemane he prayed, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him” (Luke 22:42–43). Through his divine faith and understanding, he was able to endure, even unto death, the suffering that was necessary for complete obedience to the Father.

On the practical side, obedience during cancer treatment is mandatory. I was instructed what I should eat and drink, what my activities should be, and what medications I must take. I knew that the surgery would be painful, the chemotherapy would take me as close to death as possible to kill the cancer, and the radiation could burn me. I did not want any of it. I could have said no. I could have opted out of treatment. I walked into the hospital feeling perfectly fine. I had to have faith that what the x-rays and ultrasound showed was actually there. I had to have faith that the treatment would save my life. There are laws in medical treatment that may not be foolproof, but I was willing to go with the odds that the treatment would be successful.

King Lear, as the maker of laws, abrogates his responsibilities by giving his kingdom to his daughters. He is then trapped in the laws they make and suffers through forced obedience to be subject to those laws and decrees. For example, it is exceedingly painful for him to be divested of his train of knights because they are symbols of his former power. When told that he does not need them, he gives one of his most famous speeches to his richly gowned eldest daughters:

O, reason not the need! our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man’s life is cheap as beast’s. Thou art a lady;
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear’st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. (2.4.264–70)

A mild and gentle King Lear emerges at the end of the play, one tempered by his suffering into unquestioning obedience. As he and Cordelia are taken to prison (fig. 3), he meekly submits, saying:

Come let’s away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage;
Lesson Three: Patience

The scriptures teach us about patience in suffering: “Tribulation worketh patience” (Rom. 5:3) and, moreover, “For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1 Pet. 2:20-21).

Patience, long-suffering, enduring to the end—these virtues are repeatedly encouraged in the scriptures. These virtues also relate to our individual suffering. Although we fight to maintain our health, we also realize that our timetable is not the Lord’s timetable. Treatment must take its course. Healing comes at its own speed. And sometimes healing does not come, and those we love are taken. Knowing all this mentally is quite different from experiencing it emotionally. Patient acceptance of God’s will is not easy.

I recall one day sitting alone at home on a kitchen chair, hair gone, nausea threatening to overpower me again. I wept in self-pity. But time has brought my hair back and the chemicals are out of my system. A day at a time. A month at a time. A year at a time. We can endure when we break it into bits. When we think of patience, we remember the patience of Job. His steadfast endurance was based on deep faith. He knew that God was aware of him and his suffering when he says that God “knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10).

In the 121st section of the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith also was reminded of the need for patience when the Lord said to him:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. (D&C 121:7-8)

King Lear also understands the need for patience in his suffering, but it is a hard lesson for him, one mixed with self-pity and anger. He says:

You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need! You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
Fig. 3. “Come, let’s away to prison: / We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage” (5.3.8–9). Humbled by obedience to laws he no longer controls, a once-proud King Lear is led away to prison with his only faithful daughter, Cordelia. Shakespeare, *Globe Illustrated Shakespeare*, 1579.
As full of grief as age, wretched in both.
If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks! (2.4.371–78)

By the end of the play, he demonstrates a quiet acceptance of his condition. He is no longer full of violence and anger as the doctor says, “Be comforted, good madam, the great rage, / You see, is kill’d in him” (4.7.77–78). Unlike his running away from help in act 4, scene 6, he meekly recounts the intensity of his suffering and patiently accepts the ministrations of his loved ones. Upon waking, he looks to Cordelia and says:

LEAR. You do me wrong to take me out o’ th’ grave;
Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.
COR. Sir, do you know me?
LEAR. You are a spirit, I know; [when] did you die? (4.7.44–48)

Accepting help from others is a significant part of patience. During my illness, many kind neighbors, family, and friends brought flowers and food. Although it is better to give than to receive, sometimes receiving is the greater gift, patiently waiting, knowing that someday you will be strong enough to be the giver again (fig. 4).

Lesson Four: Perspective

We know that we must pass through life with its tests, and many of those tests involve suffering of some kind. The gospel perspective is of the greatest significance. Knowing the reason for our sojourn here and our ultimate goal if we endure well gives the broadest perspective possible. Through trials and difficulties, we can always be aware of the plan of happiness in its fullness and know that, as the Lord told Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail, “all these things shall give thee experience and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). We find in Revelation 2:10, “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer ... [but] be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

We shouldn’t fear the adversity of this life if we know it is part of the plan that shall lead us to reunion with Christ and joy in the life to come. But sometimes we do fear, and we have a hard time seeing the broad perspective. Focusing on the purpose of life and reading again the marvelous scriptures about the plan of salvation are absolutely vital. In addition, measuring our
condition against those more unfortunate provides a view that is humbling. One day when I was grumbling about the numerous side effects of my treatment, my doctor brought me up short. “I signed three death certificates this week for women with breast cancer,” he said.

In *King Lear*, several of the characters besides Lear gain perspective from seeing suffering worse than their own. When Edgar encounters his father, blinded, being led onto the heath from his home and lands, Edgar can hardly speak. Although he himself has been wrongly condemned with a price put on his head and has found his only safety in pretending to be a madman and beggar, he is overwhelmed by his father’s sufferings and cries out:

> World, world, O world!
>
> O gods! Who is’t can say, “I am at the worst”? I am worse than e’er I was . . . And worse I may be yet: the worst is not So long as we can say, “This is the worst.” (4.1.10, 24–28)

As his grief and pity are muffled by his need to keep up the disguise of a madman, he says to his father, “Poor Tom’s a-cold” (4.1.52). In an aside, he explains he cannot keep up the facade further but notes, “yet I must.” To his father, he can only say, “Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed” (4.1.54).
No longer a king, Lear is cast out, homeless, hungry, and cold. Edgar says of him:

When we our betters see bearing our woes,
We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
Who alone suffers, suffers most i’ th’ mind,
Leaving free things and happy shows behind,
But then the mind much sufferance doth o’erskip,
When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.
How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend makes the King bow. (3.6.102–9)

King Lear himself learns perspective in his madness (fig. 5). His first important lesson is what kingship means. He learns what it is to be a king from his position as a beggar. Ranging in and out of lucidity, he says to Gloucester:

Thou hast seen a farmer’s dog bark at a beggar?...
And the creature run from the cur?
There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog’s obey’d in office. (4.6.154–57)

My illness has given me the opportunity to think about who I am. My faith has deepened. Perhaps my experience will help prepare me in some way to complete my stewardship of this life. President Brigham Young said of Jesus, “Why should we imagine for one moment that we can be prepared to enter into the kingdom of rest with him and the Father, without passing through similar ordeals?”

**Lesson Five: Love**

We do not suffer in life because God hates us. He is not punishing us. Life is the greatest school we could have, and suffering is part of the curriculum. We are tested in life by adversity, or “proved,” as the scriptures term it, to learn love: “The Lord your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 13:3). From our suffering, we learn not only to appreciate the unconditional love given to us by the Savior through his sufferings, but we also experience and learn from the unconditional love of those who worry about us and care for us.

Throughout my treatment, my husband and daughters cared for me tenderly. As I came out of the anesthesia after the surgery, my husband’s face was the first thing I saw. He was always there, even through the rough moments. He made sure I had rest and continues to watch over me so that I do not overdo. My eldest daughter checked on me every day, bringing
food and helping however she could. My youngest daughter drove up from Las Vegas to go wig shopping with me. Both of my sons kept in close touch. Then my three older sisters—one from Indiana, one from California, and one from Salt Lake City—spent time caring for me throughout the chemotherapy treatments. They drove me to my appointments and held my arm as I staggered to the car after a treatment. They fixed meals for me and told jokes to cheer me up. As I sat drinking the quarts of fluid to flush the chemical from my system, we sat and played cards—Michigan Rummy. When the chemicals warped my memory, they teased me that I could remember well enough to win, even if I could not remember who had come to the door ten minutes previously. My visiting teachers brought a blanket, and the cancer society provided a quilt to help when I went through fever and chilling. Flowers and houseplants arrived from friends and neighbors.

At BYU, my colleagues were always willing to help with my classes. When I was unable to complete some of my administrative duties as associate chair, the chair, John Tanner, stepped in and bore the load. Charity is the pure love of Christ. Everywhere I turned, I received an abundance of charity, of pure unconditional love. It surrounded me and cushioned me in its abundance.

Unconditional love is shown many times in King Lear. The first time is when Cordelia is disowned, yet the character of France takes her at fortune’s
odds. The dowry is forgotten. There are no strings to his love for her. Another manifestation of this love is the Fool for King Lear. Through his witty riddles and songs, he tries to make Lear understand the enormity of what Lear has done, and then when Lear goes out into the storm, the Fool goes with him. The Fool’s love does not need the soft court accommodations to stay true. Kent also shows unconditional love for Lear when he returns in disguise to serve him after being banished. A fourth example of unconditional love is that which Edgar bears for his father. Even though his father has rejected him, Edgar, disguised as a madman and beggar, returns to serve him, saying, “Give me thy arm; / Poor Tom shall lead thee” (4.1.78–79). The Christian concept of loving those who hate you is personified in the love of the Fool, Kent, and Edgar.

Perhaps the most significant example of unconditional love comes at the conclusion of the play when Lear is reunited with his youngest daughter, Cordelia. Because of the cruelty of his older daughters, he doubts the reality of love, thinking that Cordelia must hate him for his mistakes. He learns the contrary. Cordelia shows that her love for him is without strings, or “without regards”—a phrase that means unconditional love to which we are introduced in the first scene. In a touching scene of reconciliation, he tries to kneel to her for forgiveness of the wrongs he has done her (fig. 6). But she has already forgiven and finds “no cause” to hinder her love. She wants his blessing, not revenge for wrongs, and says:

O, look upon me, sir,
And hold your hand in benediction o’er me.
[No sir,] you must not kneel.

King Lear responds:

Pray do not mock me,
I am a very foolish fond old man;
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
And to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you, and know this man,
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is, and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. (4.7.56–67)

As she weeps, he misinterprets her expression but also recognizes her:

LEAR. Do not laugh at me,
For (as I am a man) I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.
COR. And so I am; I am.
Fig. 6. Near the end of the play, Lear asks forgiveness of Cordelia, now the queen of France. Cordelia, the daughter Lear rejected and cast out, is moved to compassion when she hears of the ill treatment her father has received at the hands of her sisters. Lovingly, she refuses to let Lear kneel to her, telling him she has “no cause” to hate him (4.7.74). Shakespeare, *Globe Illustrated Shakespeare*, 1625.
LEAR. Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray weep not.  
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me, for your sisters  
Have (as I do remember) done me wrong;  
You have some cause, they have not.  
COR. No cause, no cause. (4.7.67–74)

The two phrases “no regards” and “no cause” are touchstones in the play. Love is given without strings attached. Wrongs can be forgiven through love. Through all of the suffering in the play comes the knowledge that pain is made bearable when unconditional love is present.

I feel richly blessed to have such family and friends who love me. I also testify to the love shown as an answer to prayers. I know God loves me. I feel his love in my recovery. I appreciate even more Christ’s sufferings for me. He felt my fears; he knew my pain. He allowed me to partake of his fellowship. I hope that my experience has taught me to reach out in love to others in their suffering and “lift up the hands which hang down” (Heb. 12:12). Unconditional love is the greatest lesson we can learn in this life, both in the giving and in the receiving.

Sally T. Taylor (sally_taylor@byu.edu) is Professor Emeritus of English at Brigham Young University. She received a PhD in English from the University of Utah.