

Lucy Ferriss

Meditation on Pain

About every six seconds someone stabs me in the middle of my back, just left of my spine. He stabs with a short, thick dagger, which he twists once, maybe twice before pulling it out. Six seconds later, same thing. With each stab, my breath stops short. Breathe, I tell myself, breathe. I try not to cry out. Crying out sinks the dagger deeper.

Sometimes it's not a dagger. Sometimes it's a mouth. A mouth of pain. About the size of a toddler's mouth, it presses its lips together, holding the pain in, for six seconds. Then the little toddler lips open, and inside blooms red, screaming, gums and lips and tongue and little white teeth of pure pain. The lips close again, count to six, open.

The first time this happened to me, I thought I had pulled a muscle. I managed to drive to a walk-in clinic, where the doctor asked me to touch my toes. When I did, he told me I couldn't be that flexible with a pulled muscle. I had shingles, he said. He prescribed antiviral drugs, for which I was deeply grateful. The only other time I had had shingles was in the 1980s, before the antivirals were available. I'd had a new boyfriend, who was horrified by the rash spreading down my torso, my arm, my hip. Everything ached, I remember, but I couldn't let my skin be touched. The shingles lasted seven weeks, three weeks longer than the boyfriend.

Now the dagger sank only into this particular spot on my back, no rash emerged, and nothing spread. But by the time I'd filled the prescription, the dagger was twisting; the mouth of pain was opening, shutting, opening. I couldn't walk properly. Half-bent, crying out with each step, I made it to the bathroom and wept on the toilet. I took the antivirals. I dug out a vial of hydrocodone, from my older son's wisdom tooth extraction. My husband rolled the tv set into the living room, where I lay on my side on the couch, zonked on opiates, glugging brandy, and watching *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. I understood nothing of the story—only the rain, the wind and fire, that beneficent feral little girl, the melting ice caps, the roaring animals.

Like the waters, the pain receded after three days. A month later, it came again. Ten months later, again, and again three weeks after I finished the antivirals. Shingles, the doctors said. Meanwhile, I'd started getting headaches, on the left side of my head at the back, every two months or so, that lasted almost two weeks without ceasing. The doctors called these migraines, or tension, or occipital neuralgia. The pain would not let me sleep, I told them. They regarded me skeptically. I get cavities filled, I told them, without Novocaine. When I broke my wrist, I didn't even realize it. My pain threshold is quite high.

On a scale of one to ten, they ask me. We have conceived this scale, perhaps, in response to the conundrum framed by Virginia Woolf:

Let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out.

A doctor's office is not the place for brand new words. It is the place for numbers. The scale gives suggestions: ten is "the worst pain you can imagine." If you choose ten, are you dying? But dying, experts say, can be painless. A heart attack, a simple cramp in the chest, then the release of breath and it's over. So think childbirth, but I can't. Not because I've forgotten, the way received wisdom says you do, but because birthing pain was labor, was work, was aimed at producing something. The mouth of pain in my back opens and closes and says nothing, and I cannot feed it, it will not be satisfied. "I have discovered," Eula Biss writes, "that the pain I am in is always the worst pain imaginable." But I do not want to insult the monster afflicting me by supposing that he cannot up the ante. I circle "9."

Over the years the doctors have prescribed antiseizure medications, gabapentin and amitriptyline. They have prescribed muscle relaxants, anti-inflammatories, migraine drugs, more opiates. They have ordered scans. They've sent me to physical therapy. I've tried chiropractic, acupuncture, massage, biofeedback.

One minute you're a member of the body politic. The next, you're a body, a receptacle for pharmaceuticals and an endless bore at the few parties you still attend. Each time you try a new doctor, he squints, certain you must be telling him the same thing he's heard before, only using different words. The nurse practitioners keep asking: are you sure you're not sensitive to light? to noise? Are you sure you don't get nauseated?

Okay, you finally admit, the pain is horrendous. With that kind of pain, you don't want bright lights or loud noises, and you sure as hell can't eat anything. Now they've got you. The doctor comes in, looks at the chart, says, Uh-huh, photosensitivity, aural sensitivity, it's a migraine. Migraines, you remind him, last a couple of days at the outside. This headache lasts two weeks. Right, he says. Couple days more or less. You've got a migraine.

But the stabbing in the back, you say. That came on all of a sudden and lasted three days before the antivirals kicked it in the balls, and as soon as it left the headache came on.

They send you to an infectious disease specialist, who says it's herpes simplex, not the herpes zoster that causes shingles. She asks you questions about the time you had genital herpes. Only you've never had genital herpes, you keep telling her. You can hardly say the word, *herpes*. It's such an ugly word. Puts you in mind of herpetologists, those people who study slimy, crawly things, and in fact it comes from the same Greek word meaning *to creep*. When you deny your herpes, the doctor regards you skeptically. You can't even remember having had a cold sore, but sure enough, the titer for herpes simplex shows up in your blood, and that nails it as far as she's concerned. *To creep*. She puts you on a prophylactic dose of antivirals. A week later, you get a headache. Three months later, the back-stabbing thing, then the headache.

I'm switching back to first person because this happens to me, not to you. Everyone who tells me, *Oh, I get that too!* narrates a story of muscle spasm, slipped disc, migraine. These things are awful. They are not the same. I am jealous of my pain. I will not have it made common, not after all these doctors, all these failed cures. I will not share it.

When the stabbing gets worse, maybe sixteen hours into the attack, I try to lie very, very still. I lie on my right side clutching a pillow, my knees drawn up and my hands tucked under my chin. At first I try to read this way—I've got classes to prep for—but moving my hand to turn the page of the book brings on a sharp stab and a deep twist of the knife. If I raise my head, a scream rips from my throat. I give up and shut my eyes. I focus on my breathing, to keep it shallow. When my husband comes in to ask if he can do anything, I wait until I've inhaled. Then I say, "No, thanks, honey, I'm lying still," all in one exhale. The pain usually grabs me midway through that sentence anyhow, but I try to fool it. If I have to blow my nose or scratch the itch in my temple, I wait until a spasm of pain has hit, and then I act, since the spasm's there already.

After twenty minutes of my lying still as a stone, the pain subsides. Now it's

just the toddler mouth, opening to its red horror in the middle of my back, then closing again, all while I keep the breathing steady, shallow. I wait as long as possible before getting up to pee, because then all hell breaks loose—*Ha! Ha! Gotcha! Stab! Stab! Stab and twist! Awwwoo!*—while I stumble to the bathroom, let down a yellow stream, stumble back, and lie in bed weeping and cursing the Old Testament God in whom I now fervently believe.

My husband warms up the vibrating massage tool he bought on Amazon and runs it up and down my back, up and down, up and down. The thrumming goes deep into the nerve. For maybe ten blissful minutes, I sleep.

Our poets of pain are Donne, who lay gripped by malaria; Kafka, who died of starvation; Dickinson, with her strabismus; Fanny Burney, who endured a mastectomy awake and without anesthetic. Here's Donne, wishing he were paying the debt for pleasure:

'Cause I did suffer I must suffer pain.
Th' hydropic drunkard, and night-scouting thief,
The itchy lecher, and self-tickling proud
Have the remembrance of past joys for relief
Of comming ills. To (poor) me is allowed
No ease

Oh, you self-pitier, you Christian fool. Thinking that pain ought to be payment, ought to be just. Give me Dickinson, who suffered from God knows what, but took suffering on its own terms:

Pain has an element of blank;
It cannot recollect
When it began, or if there were
A day when it was not.

It has no future but itself,
Its infinite realms contain
Its past, enlightened to perceive
New periods of pain.

As I lie stone-still, inhabiting my wracked body like a prisoner on a ship in a cyclone, I enter Dickinson's world: no memory of anything before the pain, no future without it. I am afraid of death. Yet if someone in authority were to say to me, in the midst of the four worst days, "This is the shape of

the rest of your life,” I would put a bullet into my brain without thinking twice about it.

Perhaps it's this stark choice, pain or death, that draws writers to pain like moths to flame. Kafka must have found pain erotic or he could not have written “In the Penal Colony,” with its “apparatus” inscribing the sentence upon the body of the condemned, who “for the first six hours . . . goes on living almost as before. He suffers nothing but pain. After two hours, the felt is removed, for at that point the man has no more energy for screaming.” Pain seduces language even more than sex does, for language must and will articulate—and yet where, amid this crystallized sensation, oh where do we find the words? Fanny Burney comes as close as any, in her description of her mastectomy:

when the dreadful steel was plunged into the breast—cutting through veins—arteries—flesh—nerves—I needed no injunctions not to restrain my cries. I began a scream that lasted unintermittingly during the whole time of the incision—and I almost marvel that it rings not in my Ears still! so excruciating was the agony. When the wound was made, and the instrument was withdrawn, the pain seemed undiminished, for the air that suddenly rushed into those delicate parts felt like a mass of minute but sharp and forked poniards, that were tearing the edges of the wound—but when again I felt the instrument—describing a curve—cutting against the grain, if I may so say, while the flesh resisted in a manner so forcible as to oppose and tire the hand of the operator, who was forced to change from the right to the left—then, indeed, I thought I must have expired.

And yet it's not enough. For pain is like consciousness: we have only our own and cannot genuinely imagine another. I try and fail to climb inside Burney's pain; in fact, I lock onto the words as a way of abstracting the very thing she is trying to describe. The critic Elaine Scarry claims that the body in pain is unrepresentable, but I suspect that's because language suffers a gap between writer and reader. Every pain is newborn and gropes for its outlines. Stabbed in the back, I lunge forward. My chest jerks up. My face contorts. A glottal *ungh* squeezes from my throat. If you're near me, your own mouth goes dry. If you care even a smidge about me, something hurtles through your own body. Rousseau tagged that “natural pity” as “a virtue [that] precedes the exercise of all reflection,” a language we share with the beasts he extolled.

The body, then, represents its pain quite nicely; it's only words that fall

short. Woolf again: “English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache.” Words are the cages in which we contain our monsters, and we cannot capture pain. We long to lock it down, hold it in place, study it. As if we could say, *This is what I went through*, and then it could never defeat us. Otherwise, we fear that the next time, the pain will destroy us. “Pain,” said Albert Schweitzer, “is a more terrible lord of mankind than death itself.” Statistics don’t capture pain. What good is it to say that more Americans suffer from chronic pain than from heart disease, diabetes, and cancer combined, when plenty of that pain comes with cancer? What good to detail the amount of money we spend on pain management, especially if we also learn that more than half of pain sufferers feel they have no control over their pain? Buck up, people! Lose the weight that gives you the low back pain! Stretch that neck! Statistics explain our opioid epidemic, sure. I have a nice little stash of Tramadol, hydrocodone, oxycodone, and Tylenol with codeine in the bottom drawer. When they’re gone, well, I don’t know. If I could capture the religious intensity of this pain, I imagine, I might meditate on it, determine how to navigate it on my own next time.

Then the pain passes. After a week, after a fortnight. I grow buoyant. I walk in the nectar of sunshine. I feel cleansed, innocent. “It has been said,” wrote Thomas Hardy, “that mere ease after torment is delight for a time.” Woolf finds the release from pain close to reincarnation:

We go down in the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist’s arm-chair and confuse his “Rinse the mouth—rinse the mouth” with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us.

Is this the function of pain? To yield delight in the unstuttered breath, the breach of the abscess, the sealing of the mouth of pain, the dagger-free skull, the body erect?

No. The possibility remains that one day, the pain will not cease. I know from statistics that I share this fear: a majority of Americans report a rise in anxiety associated with pain. The function of pain is to signal trouble. If the trouble is phantom, or incurable, nothing redeems the stubborn fact of physical torment. Dickinson, again, comes closer to the real bond between pain and its aftermath. “After great pain,” she begins one poem, “a formal feeling comes.” Calm, free for the moment, she pays respect to the gauntlet she’s run without invoking any romance:

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

"If outlived." Each time, the thought crosses my constricted mind: I will not survive this. It is not the pain we remember, Dickinson tells us, but the form the pain takes. "The Nerves sit Ceremonious," she writes, "like Tombs." We arrange ourselves, knowing in our secret hearts that all form collapsed within the pain, that we succumbed, that we were—for a time—not beings but qualities.

When I was a girl, I had a series of masochistic dreams. Each of them began with my approaching a little man, a sort of Rumpelstiltskin, on a street corner, and asking him to give me the dream. Then I would be plunged into a trial. I ran barefoot over burning grass, my lungs exploding. A mob lifted me and tossed me over a cliff into a rushing cataract. I clawed my way up a cliff while a volley of arrows pierced my back. I stood bound to a stake as the oily torch lit the tinder at my feet. When the dream became too frightening, I had to do the hardest thing: I had to shut my eyes in the face of the terror. When I opened them again, I would be in another dream, not a masochistic dream but an ordinary child's dream of floating or flying. I told no one of these dreams; I knew they meant something was wrong with me.

When I first began suffering from this pain—we'll call it herpes, however much I hate the word—as an adult, I wondered if I were somehow bringing it on myself, the way I used to bring on those dreams. But as I lie there, unmoving, guarding my breath, I remember that in none of the childhood dreams did I experience pain. I was proving to myself, for whatever quirky reason, that I was tough. I could stand the fire, the ice. I could stare danger in the face and then shut my eyes to it. But physically, I felt, or dreamed, nothing actually painful. Whatever afflicts me now brings me unquestionably the most intense sensation my body has ever known and may ever know. Sensation so exquisite that its memory dissipates the moment my attacker releases the vibrating nerve. But I want neither the pain nor the delight of its ease. I am tough enough. The poetry of pain desecrates the world.