

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “COUNTING THE COST” & WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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PRESENTATION SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This session is about our narratives– the ways we see the world. As human beings we are constantly trying to make sense of who we are and the world we are in. These narratives can also be seen as lenses, for just as changing our glasses will change the way we see, our choice of narrative will emphasize some aspects of a situation, downplay some aspects of a situation, and even completely ignore some aspects. (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

Drawing on our narratives is often taking place outside of our conscious awareness, but it's happening. We are continually organizing, evaluating and interpreting our experiences, bringing them into alignment with how we already understand the world or allowing them to expand and reshape how we see, which, in turn, shapes our actions (Drake, 2015).

For example, as Christians we operate with the understanding that there is a God and this understanding moves us to actions, such as prayer or worship, that would simply not make sense if there was no God. God's existence is central to our story.



WELL-BEING

SUFFERING

The lived experience of suffering is full of tensions. In cross-cultural ministry there is a paradoxical tension around suffering. The very life of wholeness we invite others to in Christ was made possible through Christ's suffering. It follows then, that as ministers of the gospel, following Christ's example, we expect suffering, and, at the same time, we acknowledge the importance of actively supporting the well-being of cross-cultural workers, which is, in effect, reducing their suffering.

The ways we choose to make meaning in the midst of this tension shapes our attitudes, our actions, and ultimately, our team and organizational cultures.

The aim of this session is not to alleviate the tension between suffering and well-being in cross-cultural ministry. Rather, it aims to demonstrate the power of our narratives, the stories we tell as individuals and organizations in the midst of these tensions, acknowledging that this power can be used to harm as well as to help.

We will do this from three angles:

- Theological narratives of suffering found within the Biblical text
- Narratives of suffering outside a theological context (from the nonprofit Human Resource Management literature)
- Reflection on theological narratives of suffering within our own contexts.

NARRATIVES OF SUFFERING IN THE BIBLE

PERSECUTION LENS

SUFFERING IS THE RESULT OF HOSTILITY TOWARD THE PEOPLE OF GOD BECAUSE OF WHO THEY ARE.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE LENS

SUFFERING IS INITIATED BY SPIRITUAL FORCES.

DISCIPLINE LENS

SUFFERING IS A FORM OF DISCIPLINE, DESIGNED BY GOD TO FORM OUR CHARACTER.

COST LENS

SUFFERING IS PART OF THE COSTLY NATURE OF FOLLOWING JESUS.

SIN LENS

SUFFERING IS THE CONSEQUENCE OF SIN.

MYSTERY LENS

SUFFERING, AT TIMES, HAS NO EXPLANATION.

The point of listing these categories is to illustrate that within the Bible itself there are multiple ways of understanding suffering.

- This guards us from lumping suffering into one generalized category, when in fact, there are different ways of understanding suffering.
- This list also opens us to the possibility that the causes of suffering may not be clear, and may even be a confluence of several categories.
- Engaging the varying Biblical lenses related to suffering can also help illustrate the power of theological narratives to shape our understanding & responses to suffering.

PERSECUTION LENS

Emphasizes hostile external opposition and innocence of the one suffering.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE LENS

Emphasizes spiritual opposition and innocence of the one suffering.

DISCIPLINE LENS

Emphasizes the need to accept suffering as an avenue for growth.

COST OF MINISTRY LENS

Emphasizes the need to accept of suffering as a part of ministry.

SIN NARRATIVE

Emphasizes the innocence of the one suffering when they endure the consequences of wrong decisions of others. When the one suffering is the wrong-doer, it invites critical re-evaluation of their actions.

MYSTERY LENS

Emphasizes the unclear meaning behind the event.

Recalling our 'lens' metaphor, we draw attention to the fact that any one interpretation of the causes of an event can be used, rightly or wrongly, depending on the context. Just as wearing reading glasses to drive would actually obscure rather than clarify one's vision.

With this in mind, let us examine this question:

Are efforts to care for global workers going too far in alleviating the necessary suffering that comes with this work?

"Necessary suffering" signals the cost narrative found in the Biblical text. Yet, as we've established here, the cost narrative is one among many theological narratives of suffering found in the Bible. This awareness draws us beyond simply accepting the cost narrative as an explanation for suffering in missions and invites us to deeper questions (Cunliffe, 2004). For example:

- In general, what types of suffering found in the Biblical text do we encounter in missions?
- What types of suffering do we have the capacity to alleviate? What types of suffering are out of our control?
- What is the purpose and role of care departments in global missions and how can we focus our efforts most effectively?

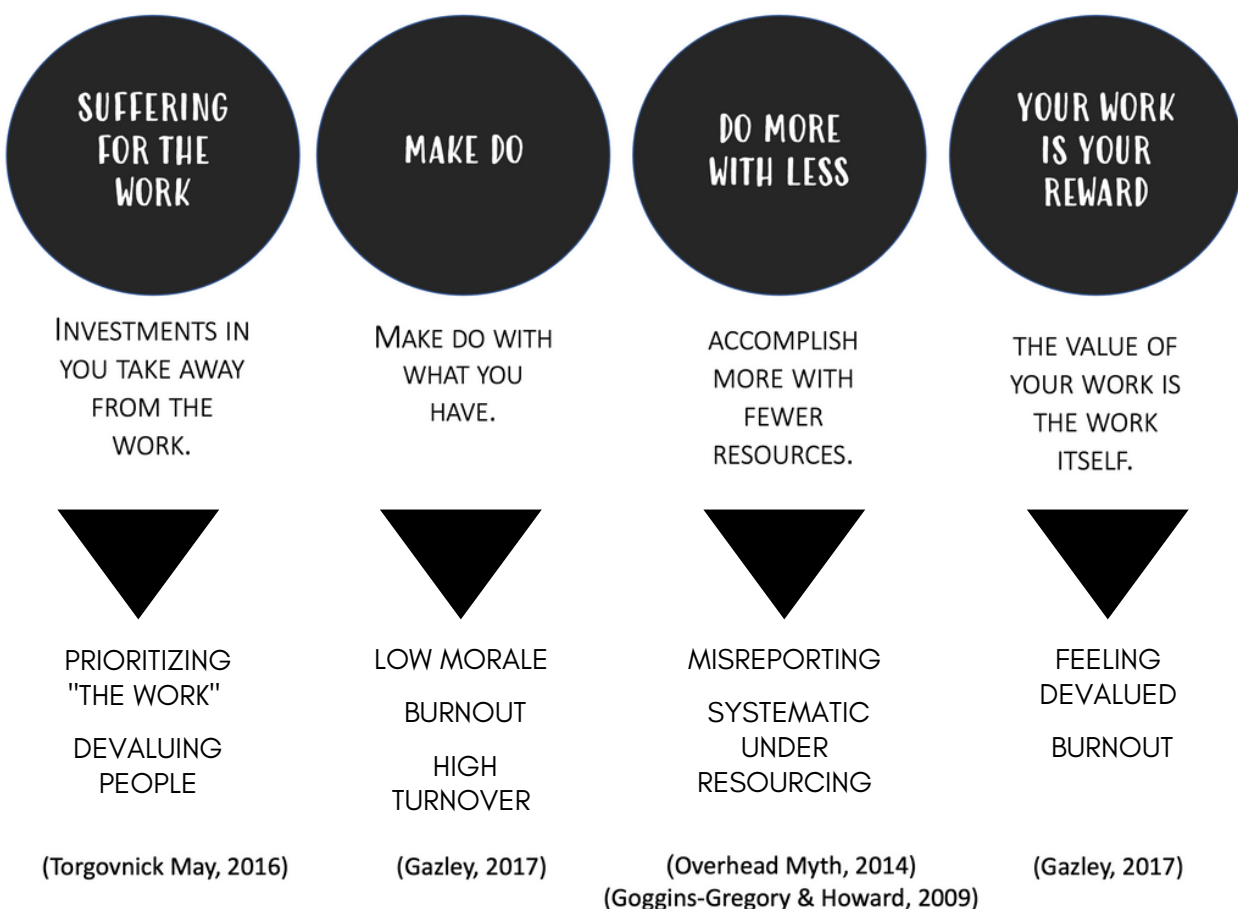
Moving into particular examples of suffering highlights the importance of context. Broad generalizations can be unhelpful in aiding our understanding of suffering. Moreover, assigning a cause for suffering that is out of alignment with the specific context can actually be harmful. Again, we are invited to curiosity and deeper exploration in each particular case.

When we proceed with humility, prayerful discernment and a posture aimed at understanding, we are best equipped to discern together the most appropriate lens for the specific suffering we are engaging.

NARRATIVES OF SUFFERING IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

As we come to terms with the power of narratives to shape our understanding and responses to suffering, it is important to note that the stories we tell within global missions are particularly powerful because they tend to involve God. This element alone, makes them more powerful as stories, because they are more meaningful to us. As Christians in the workplace, this is entirely appropriate. At the same time, we want to explore the possibility that sometimes the assumptions shaping our stories are not purely theological, though we, or our communities have framed them that way.

These narrative lenses, commonly found in nonprofit organizations, demonstrate the power of narratives to influence how resources are managed and how people are viewed and treated. For us, they also serve as an invitation to reflect on our own organizations and assumptions when it comes to our ministries, resources and people.



The point here is not to make assertions, but rather to identify potential narratives and, again, to ask deeper, more significant follow up questions to explore and evaluate our thinking. For example, how do our theological narratives align with these common lenses found in the nonprofit world?

Is it possible that our acceptance of suffering in Kingdom endeavors has created a tolerance for under-resourcing ministers?

By engaging literature from the nonprofit world, we see that a tolerance for under-resourcing ministers is entirely possible. These narrative lenses have been identified in a non-theological context, and may, in fact, be alive and well in our own contexts, but “dressed up” in theological “clothing.”

Taking time to engage our narratives of suffering offers us the opportunity to evaluate and discern which narratives we want to cultivate in our organizational cultures. This, perhaps, is one of the most powerful things about acknowledging narratives – it gives us the power to choose what stories we want to keep telling.

NARRATIVES OF SUFFERING IN OUR OWN CONTEXTS

**Start with a situation, idea or policy
related to suffering in your organization or ministry.**

1. Take time to consider what narratives are present in this situation.

- Are there any connections to narratives discussed today?
- How has this idea or policy developed? (If it is an event, how is it being approached?)
- What key voices are shaping these narratives?
- What voices need to be included?

2. Identify the deeper questions these narratives raise.

- What makes these narratives important to you (to your organization)?
- What are these lenses keeping you from seeing?
- What is at the heart of these narratives?

3. Consider the implications of these narratives.

- Do they highlight anything that is unresolved in you or your organization?
- Do they open up any new possibilities?

4. Discern your way forward.

- What you need to spend more time with?
- Who needs to be part of this conversation?
- How will this decision shape you? Your context?
- What specific actions do you want to take? Who can help?

What are you noticing as you engage this process? (Cunliffe, 2004)

CONCLUSION

There is an inherent tension between suffering and well-being in cross-cultural ministry. How we engage this tension matters. The stories we choose to tell ourselves and others in the midst of suffering has the power to shape our understandings of that suffering and our responses to it. Through the process of humbly identifying our narratives of suffering, we are invited to look more deeply at each context, listen more intently to global workers, resist easy answers, and bring the tensions we encounter before God. As we do, we draw our awareness to “what we, and others, might be taking for granted- what is being said and not said- and examining the impact this has or might have” (Cunliffe, 2016, p.741). From this place, we can begin discerning the most helpful narratives for going forward and making informed actions. This is not only a powerful way to journey with those who are suffering, it is a responsibility we steward before God.

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