



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
**Humanities**

DIVISION OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Proposal**

The attached document contains the narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful proposal may be crafted. Every successful proposal is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the program guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title:           NEH Enduring Questions Course on Suffering

Institution:            American University

Project Director:      Paul K. Wapner

Grant Program:        Enduring Questions

### *Intellectual Rationale and Teaching Value*

Everybody suffers. The amount and depth may differ and individuals may experience it in unique and ultimately personal ways, but suffering is an inescapable part of being human. Almost every endeavor—from medicine, commerce, and politics to poetry, dance, and music—reflects upon and devotes some effort to relieving pain and sorrow, and philosophers, theologians, and artists have long pondered suffering's place in human life. The impulse to avoid suffering stands at the center of most moral systems and relieving suffering often provides an overall interpretation of human purpose.

Despite or arguably because of its centrality to human life, suffering remains a mystery. Why is there so much pain and misery in the world? Is there a purpose to such affliction? How do we relate to our own pain and that of others? In short, *what is suffering?* The proposed course will invite students to read and observe some of the most thoughtful responses to this persistent enigma.

The course will inject a humanistic element into the School of International Service (SIS). SIS prides itself on its interdisciplinary character. Lawyers, economists, geographers, and even architects teach alongside sociologists and political scientists to understand global affairs. Missing from its ranks, however, are humanities scholars. This weakens the school's efforts since it leaves out the cultural aspect of global problems. Too concerned with understanding structures of power or conditions of social life, SIS scholars neglect the various meanings people have attached to political, social, and economic hardship. Ideally, the proposed course will help my colleagues and I recognize that suffering is not a homogenized occurrence generic to war, poverty, environmental degradation, and injustice that needs simply to be eradicated or ameliorated but a deep,

rich, variegated cultural experience central to being human and fundamental to shaping personal and collective life.

The course will explore how thinkers throughout the ages and in different cultural settings make sense of suffering. Specifically, it will study attitudes toward affliction. Some thinkers, for instance, see hardship as a fruitless experience to be avoided when possible and simply endured when not. To them, suffering has no compensatory purpose; if anything, it robs life of vitality and possibility. Others see redemption in suffering insofar as it instills sympathy and compassion for others and enlarges one's appreciation for joy. From this perspective, suffering invites virtue and instills life-enhancing sensitivities. Still others see pain and sorrow as states to be investigated and ultimately transcended. By developing insight into the causes of suffering people can overcome it or at least live richer lives in the process of trying to do so. (There are, of course, other views, and I will be working to identify them during the grant period.)

Educating myself to teach about attitudes toward hardship will stretch me intellectually. My current work focuses on climate suffering. It examines the lived experience of those on the frontlines of climate change. Already the most vulnerable are experiencing the adversities of climate intensification and we know that very soon all societies will face climate-related calamities. I want to understand how people feel, explain, and envision living through the distress of climate change.

There are two parts to my research. First, I want to know about the nature of suffering itself. What does humanity make of this persistent, universal phenomenon? My aim in asking this question is to develop a backdrop against which to interpret the specifics of climate hardship. Climate change represents a unique challenge that delivers

pain in distinctive forms. But the quality of the pain—how it registers on the human body and psyche—remains perennial. What wisdom can the ages offer to humanity as it confronts this unique historical moment of collective suffering?

Second, I want to examine if the uniqueness of climate hardship sheds light on humanity's understandings of suffering itself. Pain may register on the body and psyche in recurrent ways but how people make sense of the pain changes under different contexts and in light of different sources of affliction. Does climate change generate novel types of anguish that might reflect back on humanity's general understandings of suffering? Does climate change teach us anything new about the human experience of suffering?

In asking this latter question, one risks trivializing the enduring preoccupation with human affliction. After all, that thinkers have long pondered the meaning of suffering suggests that historical events are mere instances of a broader, perennial phenomenon; they may add complexion but not substance to humanity's overall understanding. However, incidents have always provided additional layers of meaning to suffering—as specific wars, famines, and floods have called on thinkers to probe more deeply the significance of human affliction. Moreover, in the case of climate change, there is reason to believe that new dimensions and understandings of human suffering may surface. After all, the world has never faced an ecosystem-altering, planetary-wide threat brought about by a single species. Might the magnitude and challenge to our identity as a species cast new insight into human suffering?

I will grow most intellectually as I situate myself at the interface between the perennial wisdom on suffering and the distinctive expression of climate hardship. I am a social scientist by training and thus lack facility in humanistic forms of inquiry. And yet,

as I investigate climate suffering, I am drawn deeper into the way people actually feel, reflect, and explain it. I would like to train myself in the humanistic literature of suffering to find my bearings.

### *Envisioned Course Design*

Students come to the School of International Service (SIS) to study global issues. Most are normatively driven—attracted to the “service” component of the school—and want to make a difference in the world. They seek to advance, for instance, human rights, peace, humane governance, international development, and sustainability. Behind each of these endeavors rests the impulse to relieve suffering. Ironically, SIS offers no course that reflects directly on the object of students’ normative concerns.

I will teach the course as a 17-19 person freshman seminar that meets once per week for 14 weeks. The small class size will ensure sustained conversation and offering the course to freshman will help orient students’ studies early in their college career. I will assign approximately 80-120 pages per week, depending on the difficulty of the text, with the intention that students will read carefully and thoroughly rather than skim.

Instruction will use a combination of mini-lectures and facilitated discussion. I will open each session with a poem or other short contemplative exercises to draw attention to the topic of the day, and then frame the discussion. This will include providing background and thematic purpose.

Over the past few years, I have incorporated a number of experiential practices into my teaching that allow students to relate to material in a personal way. These include journaling, meditation, student-to-student dialogue, outdoor excursions, and community engagement. During the grant period, I will work to identify which of these would be

most appropriate for the course. Given the topic of suffering, it should be clear that I will use these practices *not* psychotherapeutically but simply to create opportunities for students to relate meaningfully to material.

I will evaluate students based on a combination of essay writing, non-print media presentations, and short projects. Projects will be exercises that invite students to encounter texts and objects in creative ways. This may include, for instance, visiting the National Gallery of Art to consider a single painting multiple times and writing about the experience of uncovering multiple layers of meaning; observing a protest in Washington and articulating the suffering that seeks remedy or attention; viewing the outside of a hospital or cemetery and composing poetry or drawing to sense the quality of pain associated with such places.

Presently, I envision consulting two types of literature to shape the course. First, I want to find timeless treatments on suffering—works that have moved readers throughout the ages and ask deep enough questions so students can appreciate the depth and centrality of suffering in the human experience. Second, I want to explore more contemporary texts that draw on philosophical, psychological, medical, and literary narratives to explain suffering. These will provide a vocabulary for analyzing attitudes toward affliction. In addition to texts, I will also examine works of visual art and architecture that evoke rather than explain a sense of misery and pain. I will use all of these to dig deeply into humanity's long interrogation of suffering and broaden student sensitivities to its insights.

An approximate timeline for the course preparation and instruction over the life of the grant includes: 1) preparation and planning to start as of May 2015; this will include a

review of readings and creation of a syllabus; 2) implementation and instruction of the first freshman seminar course [Fall 2015]; 3) modification and adjustment [Summer 2016]; 4) implementation and instruction of the second freshman seminar course [Fall 2016]; 5) dissemination of the course as a model at select conferences [Winter/Spring 2017]. Ideally, the course will become a permanent part of the SIS curriculum.

### *Dissemination*

The topic of suffering is so central to my current work that I will instantly translate the fruits of the course into my scholarly pursuits and professional engagements. For instance, for the next few summers, I will apply insights from the course to a week-long workshop I teach for professors titled, “Contemplative Environmental Studies: Pedagogy for Self and Planet,” at the Lama Foundation. The workshop explores how to teach at this time of environmental intensification, with a specific focus on addressing the sadness, pain, and lamentation that accompany engagement with environmental issues.

Additionally, I will share what I’ve learned from teaching about suffering at two conferences. For the International Studies Association (ISA) annual meeting, I will convene a panel focused on suffering in International Relations. The panel will examine how scholars studying various global issues understand suffering in their work. For the annual Whidbey Institute conference on “Sustainability and Reflective and Contemplative Practice,” I will propose a session that explores climate hardship in light of humanity’s enduring preoccupation with suffering.

I feel exceptionally ripe to develop a course of suffering. Doing so will take me into fundamentally new waters, catapult my teaching and research, and enhance SIS and the discipline of Environmental Studies.

## **Tentative Course Readings**

(I will assign more than these six titles.)

*Bhagavad Gita*, (trans. Stephen Mitchell), Harmony 2002.

*Book of Job* (trans. Stephen Mitchell). Harper Collins 1992.

Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Pocket Books 1997.

Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Examined*. HarperOne 2009.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press 1985.

Tolstoy, Leo. "Death of Ivan Ilych," in *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*, (trans. Louis and Aylmer Maude) Harper Perennial 2004.

## **2. Tentative Art Works**

Bruegel, Pieter: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*

Kahlo, Frida: *The Little Dear* and *The Broken Column*

Munch, Edvard: *The Scream of Nature* ("The Scream")

Picasso, Pablo: *Guernica*

Saint-Gaudens, Augustus: *Adams Memorial*

Scarpa, Carlo: *Brion Cemetery*

## Preparation Readings

1. Améry, Jean. *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. Indiana University Press 2009.
2. Bakan, David. *Disease, Pain, and Sacrifice: Toward a Psychology of Suffering*. University of Chicago Press 1968.
3. Borges, Jorges. "The Library of Babel," in *Collected Fictions*. (trans. Andrew Hurley). Penguin 1998.
4. Bourdieu, Pierre, et al. *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Polity 1999.
5. Cassell, Eric J. *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*. Oxford University Press 2004.
6. Chodren, Pema. *When Things Fall Apart*, Shambhala 2013.
7. Das, Veena, et al. (eds.). *Violence and Subjectivity*. University of California Press 2000.
8. DelVeccio Good, Mary-Jo et al. (eds.) *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. University of California Press 1994.
9. Didion, Joan. *Year of Magical Thinking*. Vintage 2007.
10. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Dover 2001.
11. *Dhammapada*. (trans. Jack Kornfield and Gil Fronsdal). Shambhala 2012.
12. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self Reliance." In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Modern Library 2000.
13. Epicurus. *Letters, Principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings*. (trans. Russel M. Geer). Bobbs Merrill 1964.
14. Gilkey, Langdon. *Shantung Compound*. Harper and Row 1966.
15. Goethe von, Johann Wolfgang. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. W.W. Norton 2012.
16. Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Dover 2001.
17. Jurecic, Ann. *Illness as Narrative*. University of Pittsburgh Press 2012.
18. Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Penguin 1999.
19. Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Full Catastrophe Living*, Bantam 2013.
20. Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. (trans. Susan Bernofsky). W.W. Norton 2014.
21. Kierkegaard, Soren. *Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. (ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong). Princeton University Press 1983.
22. Kleinman, Arthur. *Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*. Basic Books 1988.
23. Kleinman, Arthur and Veena Das and Margaret Lock. (eds.), *Social Suffering*. University of California Press 1997.
24. Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. MacMillan 1969.
25. Levinas, Emmanuel. "Useless Suffering." In Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (eds.) *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*. Routledge 1988.
26. Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. CreateSpace 2014.
27. McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Vintage 2006.
28. Michael, Anne. *The Weight of Oranges*. McClelland & Stewart 1997.
29. Moscoso, Javier. *Pain: A Cultural History*. Palgrave Macmillan 2012.
30. Rey, Roselyne. *The History of Pain*. (trans. Louise Wallace et al.) Harvard University Press 1993.

31. Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell), Vintage 1989.
32. Elaine Scarry. *Thinking in an Emergency*. W.W. Norton 2012.
33. Schweizer, Harold. *Suffering and the Remedy of Art*. State University of New York Press: 2007.
34. Seneca. *On the Shortness of Life*, (ed. and trans. C.D.N. Costa). Penguin: 2005.
35. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Simon & Schuster 2012.
36. Soelle, Dorothee. *Suffering*. (trans. Everett Kahn) Fortress Press 1975.
37. Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. Viking 2009.
38. Solomon, Andrew. *Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*. Scribner 2014.
39. Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone; Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus*. (trans. Robert Fagles). Penguin 1984.
40. Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux 1988.
41. Sontag, Susan. *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux 1989.
42. Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Picador 2004.
43. Spelman, Elizabeth. *The Fruits of Sorrow: Framing our Attention to Suffering*. Beacon Press 1998.
44. Styron, William. *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*. Vintage 1992.
45. Timmerman, Jacobo. *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. (trans. Toby Talbot). Knopf 1981.
46. Williams, Terry T. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. Vintage 1992.