The Culture of Pain

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This is a book about the meanings we make out of pain. The greatest surprise I encountered in discussing this topic over the past ten years was the consistency with which I was asked a single unvarying question: Are you writing about physical pain or mental pain? The overwhelming consistency of this response convinces me that modern culture rests upon and underlying belief so strong that it grips us with the force of a founding myth. Call it the Myth of Two Pains. We live in an era when many people believe--as a basic, unexamined foundation of thought--that pain comes divided into separate types: physical and mental. These two types of pain, so the myth goes, are as different as land and sea. You feel physical pain if your arm breaks, and you feel mental pain if your heart breaks. Between these two different events we seem to imagine a gulf so wide and deep that it might as well be filled by a sea that is impossible to navigate.