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grieving death

Once there was a man taking a continuing education course entitled, “Life Without Grief.” One day, when the teacher called in sick, there was a sign on the door to the classroom that read,

“Life Without Grief Will Be Canceled Today.”



Every so often I will have lunch with a mother who has lost her son or daughter to AIDS. It is something I do for my friends who have died - taking care of their parents in a small way; reminding them who their children were in the world; telling them what important things they may never have known about their sons and daughters.

The mothers sit across the table, lean in towards me and put their hands on top of mine as they watch me chew my food. It is as if they are somehow nourished by seeing me eat, savoring the reflection, indirectly feeding their own child one last time. As they look into my eyes, we offer up our memories and we make each other cry. With tears as fresh as they were at the funerals, they prove to me that I, too, will not be forgotten.

“Bobby’s father and I finally bought the boat we’d been saving up for,” Barbara shared, “and we’re calling it, ‘Bobby’s Dream.’ He was my special one. My special one.” She told me that none of his friends call anymore. “I wish they would, so I can say to them, ‘Tell me about Bobby!’ I need to know who he was.”

One said to me, almost apologetically, “I shouldn’t be talking so much about him anymore. I shouldn’t be crying.” When I asked why, she explained that her pastor, husband and other children all say, “It has been so many years; its enough already with the tears.”

Another said, “We were a step upon his destiny. We rode with him to Glory.”

Then they feed me with pictures of the grandchildren, the nieces and the

nephews, the babies named for their sons and daughters. Their faces light up and there is joy at the table, alongside of the sorrow. In the very same conversation, in the very same sentence, they portray the ways in which they have made room for their worn-in grief alongside of their nascent gladness.

The mothers sit across the table from me. They show me their tears and they show me their joys. They have made room for both. And though many cannot see and feel what they see and feel, they have built their grief into an invisible kingdom and have inspired me with their courage to dwell there.



I prefer to think that the people I know who have died are saving me a place in line, that I'll finally get there and we can all be seated: "Thank you, the party is complete." I know there will be mourning, but I should like my years to be celebrated as well. I have loved my family and friends deeply. I had a rich, diverse, free life and I hope the energy of gratitude, aspiration and repose transcends my mortal existence and extends to those living in the universe and beyond.

– Michael Mitchell, 1962-1994

The infinity of loss. How does one begin the process of finding peace with such a faithful ache?

The process of grieving is one of staying in your body and discovering how you feel in the moment. Give yourself permission to have your feelings. Give yourself permission to spill your tears. Give yourself the time you need to be confused and angry. Sit down at your desk in front of your keyboard and begin to write. Get down on the floor and weep until you wish you could disappear into the very fiber of the carpet. Know that there is a very important difference between not wanting to be alive with these feelings, and wanting to die. Give yourself permission to feel both. Then remember that life is worth living.

Let the waves of heartache wash over you until you are drowning in your grief, whatever its origin or cause. Make room for this experience in your interior world. This is a part of your life now. Know that one day you will

no longer see yourself as a sad person, but as someone who has known sadness. Though it seems that few, if any, can understand your sorrow, it exists still. It is your private refuge. Your solemn asylum. Have mercy on yourself as you would have on others.

In the beginning, loss forces the psyche to engage an inner emergency back-up system. A steady rush of adrenaline launches you far above the world of ordinary things as you evolve into a machine, able to perform human tasks never before imaginable. One of my teachers says, "A soldier never bleeds on the battlefield." Indeed, in the very beginning and for many ensuing months, you become an indwelling infantryman, ever alert and always on guard, protecting the boundaries of your psyche and the seat of your emotional faculties. And like any soldier, if you express too much discontent, the challenges are compounded.

Memories assault. Words distract. Comfort eludes.

The monarchy of grief is still miles away. Give your mind time to travel into your heart. Give your heart time to catch up to your body. Give your body time to reach home. In time, your sorrowing will begin. In shelter, your tears will find you.

Grief makes distant the once-in-reach horizon. It limits your visibility. It strands you in time. Grief inhibits your ability to move about freely inside your own life and leaves you lost, entirely locked inside your loved one's past. Grief enslaves you within a kingdom of invisibility. At certain times, you may be flooded with words that almost adequately describe your feelings. Most times, however, you may not be able to explain what it truly feels like, even to yourself.

Be gentle with yourself; you are standing under a different sky. Be careful with others; they may not understand. The well-intentioned words of comfort from friends and companions may have a tendency to ensnare you even deeper inside your sense of aloneness. Sometimes a commonplace but heartfelt expression like, "How are you?" can sound cliché and tediously unoriginal to the mourner. "If you have to ask," you might hear yourself thinking, "then my grief truly has diminished me."

I remember my first experience visiting the Names Project AIDS

Memorial Quilt. Forty-five thousand panels representing only a small percentage of those we have lost. Laid out on the National Mall in the Capital, the offerings from faithful hearts. The mile-long stretch of grief and lost glory. The shrine for the stillborn dawning of an unforgotten life. Yet, shrouded in that union of mass sorrow, I felt somewhat more alone in my own.

Who am I among the millions of others?

Who am I amidst the church of memory? Who am I amongst the living, the grieving, those left behind? If, with a collective sorrow, we walk the corners of the cloth, who will understand my own private pain?

There may be friends and family members who will not be able to listen. Some people are allergic to other people's sorrow. Be careful how you share your sadness in this time. Surround yourself with people who love you, adore you and see you the way that you want to be seen.

Seek out places to be witnessed and validated, received and remembered.

In Judaism, the mourner is required to recite a specific prayer three times a day for an entire year in the presence of nine other Jews. Though they may be complete strangers, standing behind the mourner, listening to the "Kaddish," written in both Hebrew and Aramaic, the congregants unite into a chorus of truth, an assembly of acknowledgment. They are the ultimate witnesses, regarding with great respect the mourner's process, giving testimony to an ineffable sorrow. With the final Amen, they venerate the burden of death. It is as if they are saying, "I hear you. I notice the mark that grief has made. I will remember and hold your place among the living while you honor his place among the dead."

"I've got your back."

A mother of a high school student in California writes:

This has been a year of extraordinary loss for my family. In thirteen months, our circle was reduced by nine lives. Each death was painful, only one was "chronologically correct," whatever that means. Expanding to include the sadness, allowing for the anger and the tears, the joy and the gratitude, the inconsolable loneliness was, and continues to be a demanding journey. There were very few friends or family members who could hold the space for our grief. There was no road map for the emotional terrain we each had to cover.

The process required a profound growing of wisdom: forgiveness for the impatient; gentleness for the intolerant; kindness for the insensitive. Stillness. Yes, so much stillness as the storms raged and raged. More than anything, each of us has had to learn to be tender with our own rawness and respectful of our individual process, whatever form that takes on any given day. Over and over, again and again.

Here is a list of inappropriate things to say to a mourner:

How are you?

I know exactly how you feel

We've all been there

Besides that news, how's everything else in your life?

He's in a better place now

It gets better with time

It's time to move on

Do you think you'll ever be happy again?

Time heals all pain

When will the old "you" be back?

Let me tell you about how I dealt with it when it happened to me...

He wouldn't want you to be this way

Call me

Remember him how he was

I can't tell you what or how to feel – but...

God only gives us as much as we can handle

Heaven needed another angel

He was picked because he was special

It never gets better. Trust me. I've been there. I know.

What doesn't kill us, makes us stronger

Things only happen for the best

I'm concerned you're becoming unglued

You should only know good things from now on

One of my teachers used to say, “Sometimes when we give over to it, we have to stop and wait for things to gather in. Let the mind and body heal it.” How long should it take to get over a loss? As long as it takes. And then a little bit longer. The more important question is: how much compassion can you have for yourself during the whole process?

I think that most people can't, or don't want to put into words their feelings and experiences of death. Because we expect a lack of communication in experiences with death, love and loneliness we are afraid to ask, for fear of offending someone or putting them in an 'uncomfortable' position. But although people may be hesitant at first, I think we need to talk about these things to each other, and maybe we need the prompt of someone asking us specifically how we felt, or details about our experience.

—Ruth, age 18

Here is a list of appropriate things to say that will help the mourner:

I care

I see you

I'm always thinking of you

Your sorrow matters

I am so sorry for your loss

I can tell that you are in pain

I see what this has done to you

Tell me the last thing you said to each other

Tell me about the things he loved in life

Tell me what he called you

I have faith in your ability to handle this

Take all the time you need

No need for words to or for me

Be who you need to be

Tonight I am tasting the salt of your tears; even the ones that you aren't able to cry yet

Let my thoughts of you keep you company through this time

I will hold onto your dreams while you deal with this reality

Please know that your grief has not diminished you

Jillian is a teenager who lost her best friend in a car accident. “I should be able to see her when she’s thirty and have lunch and drink coffee and talk about the past. And then not see her for another ten years. But now I can never do that. We were a pair,” she told me. “If she could die then anyone can, including me.” The insufferable acceptance. The emptying of hands. The “what now?” of life. The wishing they were out there somewhere in the world, having dinner, watching a football game, making new friends, moving closer to the realization of their every dream. In his coming to terms with death, one teen wrote, “It’s not the end. I will call it simply, the stopping point.”

As we walk through life, our losses walk with us. Yet, the many devoted friendships and other relationships that have changed in such dramatic ways certainly stay with us, as well. As one teen says, “His love is still with me.” They are ever with us, our loved ones, moving and inspiring us, settling into places inside of us which others may never reach, perhaps even helping us to learn the lessons in life we would have learned were they still here to teach us.

After the death of my mother to breast cancer, the framework of parental support I had relied upon after all those years could never be put back together again in the same formation. I would have to find a way to create new support, to turn my greatest weakness into strength. I needed to get back to living again rather than focusing on the part of me that died. “Take control, claim it for your own and figure out how to move on.” I was sure that I heard that message from my mother, late at night when I lay in bed thinking about her.

– Andie, age 17

In the Jewish tradition there is a saying: Whenever a person walks down the street he is preceded by a host of angels crying, “Make way! Make way for the Image of God.” It comes from one of the central concepts of Judaism, the expression, “B’tzelem Elohim.” Translated to English it means that each human being is created with and depicts Divine worth. As a boy in Hebrew school, I always wondered what part of me portrayed God’s Image? How did my divinity express itself? Was it in skill, success or perfection? Was it in action, good deeds or purity? Where inside of me was God’s likeness?

Many years later, at the funeral for my Aunt Lil, I got my answer. Only a few months before his fiftieth wedding anniversary, my Uncle Seymour was now standing beside his wife's coffin. Hunched under the weight of grief, already thickly settled, his shoulders sank with each exhalation. Emptied of self, he held out his hands and surrendered to sorrow. Gone was his distinctive flair and style. His penetrating laugh. His heart. Yet in their absence was a radiant realness, an accessibility to something soft and authentic. Never before had I witnessed such vulnerability. Such humility. God's Image.

Grieving is our connection to the world.

It gets us in touch with our shared humanity and delivers us back to the beginning, where there was perfection. Grief is not the emanation of all things Divine; but in its presence, it reveals that which is most holy in all of us. A reflection of genuineness. A refraction of hope. A ripening of love.

At the end of Lil's eulogy, my uncle read aloud the secret words they shared to express their esteemed union: "With a love that knows no limits, no bounds, and is as never ending as infinity."



On the day of my father's funeral, I looked at the files in the left-hand side drawer of his desk, as he had instructed. In the very back, held together by a paper clip, were a stack of index cards, typewritten notes on how to comfort the mourner. On the first card, in his own handwriting, were these words:

"Even in times of sorrow the mourner must remember all that is good and worth living for, for God has created a basically good and lovable world. In the years that you are privileged to share, your life must bring many pleasures and teach much by your example. And your remains will lie not only in this plot of ground, but in every heart your life will touch."

